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Derrida and a Theory of Irony: Parabasis and Parataxis

Maebh Long

This thesis presents a theory of structural irony gleaned from the irony theorised and performed in the texts of thinkers whose works operate on the border of the (non)propositional: Plato, Friedrich Schlegel, Maurice Blanchot, Paul de Man, Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida. While focusing on the irony performed in the texts of Jacques Derrida, and using his engagements with these thinkers as a frame, this is not a theory of “Derridean” irony, but an irony (primarily) elaborated through a deconstructive approach and vocabulary. Structural irony is seen to take the form of the transgressive step/counter-step of parabasis and the non-hierarchical disorder of parataxis. It is an anacoluthic force/weakness, and exhibits the conjunctive/disjunctive trait of hyphenation. It is neither of cynical, aesthetic distance nor humorous, parodic engagement, but is a productive movement of (impossible) negotiation between terms. Irony is an expression of the *beyond*, *within*, and this reworking of borders and limits is performed in the fragment/aphorism. The (ir)responsible step taken in Derrida’s texts is understood as a mode of structural irony, and it is proposed that the stylistic changes that occurred in Derrida’s “later” texts were in part due to the autoimmunity caused by an overexposure to the “laws of the interview”. Throughout the thesis styles that manipulate the unmasterable excesses of irony are investigated, and each chapter ends with a reading of one of Derrida’s more “literary” or “performative” texts, while recognising and playing with the falsity of such generic makers or divisions. Inscribing Derrida within a tradition of thinkers of the non-thetic both extends readings of that tradition and of irony itself, while affording a valuable way of approaching the “structures” within Derrida’s texts. Irony is not presented as the transcendental signifier of deconstruction, but as a profitable way of understanding deconstruction and its relation to other writers.

**Derrida and a Theory of Irony:
Parabasis and Parataxis**

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2010

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Abbreviations

* denotes texts that are referenced by the number of the fragment assigned to it by the author rather than the page number.

Blanchot:

- IC *The Infinite Conversation*. Trans. Susan Hanson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- ED *The Writing of the Disaster*. Trans. Ann Smock. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995.
- SB *The Step not Beyond*. Trans. Lycette Nelson. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992.

De Man:

- AD “Autobiography as De-facement”. *MLN* 94.5 (1979): 919-30.
- AI *Aesthetic Ideology*. Ed Andrzej Warminski. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- AO *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979.
- BI *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. London: Methuen, 1983.

Derrida:

- AC* “Aphorism Countertime” Trans. Nicholas Royle. *Psyche: Inventions of the Other Volume II*. Ed Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008: 127-42.
- AE *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*. Trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.
- AF* “52 Aphorisms for a Foreword”. Trans. Andrew Benjamin. *Psyche: Inventions of the Other Volume II*. Ed Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008: 117-26.
- AM “At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am” *Psyche: Inventions of the Other Volume I*. Trans. Rubin Berezdivin and Peggy Kamuf. Ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007: 143-90.
- AP *Aporias*. Trans. Thomas Dutoit. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993.
- AR “Autoimmunity: Real and Imagined Suicides” *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*. Ed. Giovanna Borradori. Trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003: 85-137.
- AS “As if I were Dead: An Interview with Jacques Derrida”. *Applying: To Derrida*. Ed. John Brannigan et al. London: Macmillan, 1996: 212-26.

- AT "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy". Trans. John P. Leavey Jr. OLR 6.2 (1984): 3-37.
- CC "*Che cos'è la poesia?*" Trans. Peggy Kamuf. *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*. Ed. Peggy Kamuf. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991: 221-40.
- CF* *Circumfession*. Bennington, Geoffrey and Derrida, Jacques. *Jacques Derrida*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991.
- DB *Derridabase*. Bennington, Geoffrey and Derrida, Jacques. *Jacques Derrida*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991.
- DC Interview in Kearney, Richard ed. and trans. *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984: 105-126.
- DE *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*. Trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000.
- DI "Différance" *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982: 1-28.
- DS "The Double Session". *Dissemination*. Trans Barbara Johnson. London: The University of Chicago Press, 1981: 173-286.
- E "Envois" *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*. Trans Alan Bass. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987: 1-256.
- EO *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*. Ed Christie McDonald. Trans Peggy Kamuf. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988.
- ET *Echographies of Television: Filmed Interviews*. Derrida, Jacques and Bernard Stiegler. Trans. Jennifer Bajorek. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002.
- ETC "Et Cetera" Trans. Geoffrey Bennington. *Deconstructions: A User's Guide*. Ed. Nicholas Royle. Houndmills: Palgrave, 2000: 282-305.
- FL "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'". Trans. Mary Quaintance. *Acts of Religion*. Ed. Gil Anidjar. Routledge: London, 2002: 228-98.
- FW *For What Tomorrow... A Dialogue*. Derrida, Jacques and Elizabeth Roudinesco. Trans. Jeff Fort. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004.
- GD *The Gift of Death*. Trans. David Wills. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- JD *Jacques Derrida*. Bennington, Geoffrey and Derrida, Jacques. *Jacques Derrida*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991.
- K "Khōra". Trans. Ian McLeod. *On the Name*. Ed. Thomas Dutoit. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995: 89-130.
- LI *Limited Inc*. Trans. Samuel Weber. Evanston IL: Northwest U.P., 1988.
- LL *Learning to Live Finally*. Trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- LO "Living On: Border Lines". Trans. James Hulbert. *Deconstruction and Criticism*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979: 62-143.
- MB *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*. Trans Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- MC "My Chances/*Mes Chances*: A Rendezvous with Some Epicurean Stereophonies" *Psyche: Inventions of the Other Volume I*. Trans. Irene Harvey and Avital Ronell. Ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007: 344-76.

- MF *Memoires for Paul de Man*. Trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler, et al. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989.
- N *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews 1971-2001*. Ed. and trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.
- OG *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997.
- OH *Of Hospitality*. Trans. Rachel Bowlby. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000.
- P *Points... Interviews, 1974-1994*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf et al. Ed. Elizabeth Weber. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995.
- PF *The Politics of Friendship*. Trans. George Collins. London: Verso, 2005.
- PI "Psyche: Invention of the Other" *Psyche: Inventions of the Other Volume I*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007: 1-47.
- PM *Paper Machine*. Trans. Rachel Bowlby. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005.
- PO *Positions*. Trans. Alan Bass. London: The Athlone Press, 1981.
- PP "Plato's Pharmacy". *Dissemination*. Trans Barbara Johnson. London: The University of Chicago Press, 1981: 61-172.
- R *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*. Trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005.
- RM "The *Retrait* of Metaphor". *Psyche: Inventions of the Other Volume I*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. Ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007: 48-81.
- S *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*. Trans. Barbara Harlow. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979.
- SI "This Strange Institution Called Literature" Interview with Derek Attridge. *Acts of Literature*. Ed. Derek Attridge. New York: Routledge, 1992: 33-75.
- SM *Spectres of Marx*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- ST "Some Statements and Truisms About Neologisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, And Other Small Seismisms". Trans. Anne Tomiche. *The States of 'Theory': History, Art, and Critical Discourse*. Ed. David Carroll. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990: 63-94.
- SQ *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*. Ed. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen. Trans. Thomas Dutoit, Outi Pasanen et al. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005.
- T "Telepathy" *Psyche: Inventions of the Other Volume I*. Trans. Nicholas Royle. Ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007: 226-61.
- TO *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*. Trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992.
- TS *A Taste for the Secret*. Jacques and Maurizio Ferraris. Trans. Giacomo Donis. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002.
- TT "Title (to be specified)" Trans. Tom Conley. *SubStance* 10.2 (1981): 4-22.
- WM "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy" *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982: 207-72.
- WA *Without Alibi*. Ed. and trans. Peggy Kamuf. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.
- WD *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. London: Routledge, 2001.

Levinas:

- OB *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1981.
- WO “Wholly Otherwise”. Trans. Simon Critchley. *Re-Reading Levinas*. Ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991: 3-10.

Plato:

- Apol* *Apology*. Trans. G.M.A Grube: 17-36.
- Char* *Charmides*. Trans. Rosamond Kent Sprague: 639-63.
- Euth* *Euthyphro*. Trans. G.M.A Grube: 1-16.
- Gorg* *Gorgias*. Trans. Donald. J. Zeyl: 791-869.
- Meno* *Meno*. Trans. G.M.A Grube: 870-97.
- Phae* *Phaedrus*. Trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff: 506-56.
- Rep* *Republic*. Trans. G.M.A Grube and Rev. C.D.C. Reeve: 971-1223.
- Symp* *Symposium*. Trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff: 457-505.

(All from Plato’s *Complete Works*. Ed. John M. Cooper. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997.)

Schlegel:

- A* “Athenäum fragments” in *Lucinde and the Fragments*. Trans. Peter Firchow. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1971: 161-240.
- L* “Critical Fragments” (first published in the *Lyceum* in 1797) in *Lucinde and the Fragments*. Trans. Peter Firchow. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1971: 143-59.
- CG “*Charakteristik der griechischen Komödie*” [“Characteristics of Greek Comedy”] in *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe Vol 11: Wissenschaft der Europäischen Literatur (1795-1804)*. Ed. Ernst Behler. Munich: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1958 (my translation): 86-97.
- DP “Dialogue on Poetry” in *Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms*. Trans. Ernst Behler and Roman Struc. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1968: 51-117.
- FI* “1797-8 *Fragmente zur Litterature und Poesie I*” [“1797-8 Fragments on Literature and Poesie I”] in *Literary Notebooks 1797-1801*. Ed. Hans Eichner. The Athlone Press: London, 1957 (my translation): 19-132.
- FII* “1798-1801 *Fragmente zur Litterature und Poesie II und Ideen zu Gedichten*” [“1798-1801 Fragments on Literature and Poesie II and Ideas for Poems”] in *Literary Notebooks 1797-1801*. Ed. Hans Eichner. The Athlone Press: London, 1957 (my translation): 158-220.
- GM On Goethe’s *Meister* in *Classical and Romantic German Aesthetics*. Ed. J. M. Bernstein. Trans. Peter Firchow. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 269-86.
- I* “Ideas” in *Lucinde and the Fragments*. Trans. Peter Firchow. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1971: 241-56.

- IP* “1798 *Ideen zu Gedichten*” [1798 Ideas for Poems] in *Literary Notebooks 1797- 1801*. Ed. Hans Eichner. The Athlone Press: London, 1957 (my translation): 133-57.
- OI “On Incomprehensibility” in *Classical and Romantic German Aesthetics*. Ed. J. M. Bernstein. Trans. Peter Firchow. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 297-308.
- PF* “*Philosophische Fragmente, Erste Epoche II*, [1796-1798]” [“Philosophical Fragments, First Epoch, [1796-1798]] in *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe Vol.18: Philosophische Lehrjahre (1796-1806)*. Ed. Ernst Behler. Munich: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1963 (my translation): 17-120.
- PFZ* “*Philosophische Fragmente, Zweite Epoche II*, [1798-1801]” [“Philosophical Fragments, Second Epoch, [1798-1801] in *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe Vol. 18: Philosophische Lehrjahre (1796-1806)*. Ed. Ernst Behler. Munich: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1963 (my translation): 323-422.
- ZW “*Philosophische Vorlesungen insbesondere über Philosophie der Sprache und des Wortes: Zweite Vorlesung.*” [“Philosophical Lectures, Particularly on the Philosophy of Language and the Word: Second Lecture”] in *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe Vol 10: Philosophie des Lebens etc. (1827-1829)*. Ed. Ernst Behler. Munich: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1969 (my translation): 334-56.

Introduction

Over the course of its history, the signifier *irony* has designated an almost bewildering array of contradictory signifieds, often in the works of the same writer. When we use the term we are thus drawn into a complex web of paradoxical implications, as irony is vile, self-congratulatory superiority *and* humble or urbane self-deprecation. It is a technique of sly trickery *and* harsh but caring pedagogy. It is a simple figure of speech and an entire way of life, a mild form of dissimulation and the cause of an execution. It is a trope, the trope of tropes, and not a trope at all. It is a plain inversion and a complex mode of consciousness, immersed engagement and superior distance, an inevitable function of language and a cruel and unusual use. It is purely rhetorical and deeply structural, (auto)*poiesis* and (auto)annihilation, a duty and an indulgence. It is a dialectic, an entrapped oscillation, an endless interruption, a permanent becoming, political and private, transcendent and nihilistic, ethical, unethical and a-ethical. It is sarcasm, wit, scepticism and enthusiasm, evokes sympathy and hostility, empathy and incomprehension, and is a divine and wholly human mode of creation. It is inclusive and exclusive, a display of poetic skill, indicative of the complete absence of literary ability, historically grounded and ahistorical, productive and interruptive of communication. It is simple irony, complex irony, conditional irony, reverse irony, rhetorical irony, dramatic irony, tragic irony, satirical irony, situational irony, Socratic irony, Romantic irony and the irony of irony.

Despite the myriad uses and theories of irony, common ground is typically found in the sense of disjunction that irony produces, a gap expressible as the difference between what is said and what is meant, what was expected and what occurred, or the expressed and the excess. The majority of approaches to irony address it as a figurative or tropological flourish that masks an attainable literal meaning or authorial intention; like a metaphor, irony can be traced backwards to an original source and “diffused” through the discovery of the true, intended meaning. Against an irony grounded in semantic richness and centred on an original, “authentic” meaning, this thesis proffers a theory of *structural irony* that functions in language irrespective of authorial manipulation or reader perception.

The positing of a structural irony is not new – Gary Peters describes irony as a “complex and dissonant structural principle”,¹ and Marian Hobson argues for a structural irony whereby “language itself seems to be being ironic, rather than there being an author, a source behind it controlling what is going on”.² This thesis, however, takes “*les pas de plus et les plus de pas*” (the additional steps and the one more/no more steps) of irony, offering a specific formulation of structural irony that both describes and performs its (counter)movements. Structural irony will be shown to operate through the transgressive, interrupted step/counter-step of *parabasis*, and through the non-hierarchical order/disorder that is *parataxis*. Irony is *anacoluthic*, the interruption of codes and grammatical expectations, and shows the trait of *hyphenation*, a stroke of (dis)connection that unites and separates. The structural irony of parabasis and parataxis steps away from the seeming inevitability of a presented order or system, and performs the possibility of reworking that is radically manifested in the *fragment* or *aphorism*. The fragment/aphorism is presented as the “perfect” ironic form, with all cognisance of the oxymoronic hyphenation between the closure or inevitability associated with a “perfect form” and the openness and aleatory reworkings of irony. Irony is thus a force of weakness that can be manipulated but not controlled, a (counter)force of the *autoimmune* that turns an entity in on itself in protection and exposure.

Irony is a source of possibility and potentiality, an inventive or productive complication that one negotiates. As Miller writes, “The difficulty in analysing the narrative line is the difficulty, or rather the impossibility, of mastering the unmasterable, the trope that is no trope ... the trope-no-trope of irony”.³ Irony is not simply the sense of discrepancy within a particular context but a pervasive inconsistency or incongruity that stems from the divided mark and the resultant permanent impossibility of closure. It is a force/weakness that operates deep within the logical structure of the split mark which renders clear categories, particularly of intention, wholly unstable. Irony is the expression of the *beyond*, *within*; the beyond of language within language, the beyond of grammar within

¹ Gary Peters, *Irony and Singularity: Aesthetic Education from Kant to Levinas* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005) 103.

² Marian Hobson, “Derrida’s Irony? Or, in order that Homeland security does not come too early to the case”, *Derrida’s Legacies: Literature and Philosophy*, ed. Simon Glendinning and Robert Eaglestone (London: Routledge, 2008) 103.

³ J. Hillis Miller, *Reading Narrative* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998) 177.

grammar, the beyond of ethics within ethics. It is, in other words, the excess generated by the divided mark and the connections of the textual web that the non-thetic and the non-propositional do not attempt to mask or suppress.

The theory of structural irony proposed in this thesis is not specifically a theory of “Derridean irony”, as the structures it outlines are not restricted to texts by Derrida. The common threads are, however, joined together through Derrida, and through a vocabulary and approach that is undeniably grounded in deconstruction. As such it is a (deconstructive) theory of (deconstructive) irony; a theory which is interrupted by that which it theorises; by the unsystematisable and non-propositional excesses that irony “names” and which deconstruction “recognises”.⁴ An ironic reading is not an arch, satirical engagement – or at least not specifically – but a reading that describes and/or performs the force of weakness that is irony. A deconstructive reading can then be described as a singular engagement with a text that recognises the “happening” of irony – the structural conjunctions and disjunctions within and between marks and structures – and which shows, through interruptions, translations and associations, that systematic and structural institutions are predicated on grounds neither absolute nor inevitable.⁵ A deconstructive reading is a reading of irony that works not to suppress or diffuse irony; that is, it does not presume it to be grounded in authorial intention, but traces and investigates its irrepressible movement(s). In short, deconstruction happens because irony happens.

The theory of structural irony of this thesis is gleaned from an analysis of the theories and uses of irony by writers who recognise the importance of the figurative or non-thetic – Plato, Friedrich Schlegel, Maurice Blanchot, Paul de Man, Emmanuel Levinas and, above all, Jacques Derrida. Each thinker envisaged irony according to different philosophical or theoretical perspectives, and each employed irony for vastly different functions. This thesis does not conflate their uses of irony, but presents a theory of irony formulated from the common operative structures. Thus Nicholas Royle speaks of “Derrida’s humour, his sense of irony, of structural irony, his extraordinary thinking of the serious and the non-

⁴ Names while knowing the conjunction/disjunction between title and object, and recognises while not making an unconditional object of knowledge.

⁵ Bennington describes, or “schematise[s] a little brutally” (*Interrupting Derrida* (London: Routledge, 2000) 96) Derrida’s mode of reading as double, divided between “what is *declared* and what is *said*” (96) – between the anti-metaphysical intentions and the metaphysical allegiances, and vice versa. His description bears a striking resemblance to descriptions of irony.

serious”,⁶ while Alexander Nehamas sees in Plato’s (structural) irony one of the “most scornful displays of the weakness of readers who assume they are morally superior to various characters”.⁷ Schlegel’s irony was a project of *Bildung*, de Man’s was an implacable text machine, Levinas’s was instrumental in the approach to the other. Plato used irony to mask irony, while Derrida uses irony to (re)reveal it; despite radically different uses of the “structure”, it remains.

This should not suggest that the thinkers addressed were all theorists of irony, nor that they would have been comfortable with the ironist label. Levinas would no doubt be somewhat surprised, and perhaps appalled, to be labelled an ironic author, but the conjunctions and interruptions with which his approach to the other is expressed/made render his work a performance of structural irony. Similarly, Derrida did not leave behind – at least to my knowledge – a definite theory of irony, nor did he appear to be wholly comfortable with the term. In “This Strange Institution” Derrida says:

Paul de Man was not wrong in suggesting that ultimately all literary rhetoric in general is of itself deconstructive, practising what you might call a sort of irony, an irony of detachment with regard to metaphysical belief or thesis, even when it apparently puts it forward. No doubt this should be made more complex, “irony” is perhaps not the best category to designate this “suspension”, this *epochē*, but there is here, certainly, something irreducible in poetic or literary experience. (SI 50)

In *Memoires for Paul de Man* one senses that Derrida feels obliged to stress or invent a positive dimension to the term: “Underlying and beyond the most rigorous, critical, and relentless irony, within that ‘*Ironie der Ironie*’ evoked by Schlegel, whom he would often quote, Paul de Man was a thinker of affirmation” (MF 21). However, despite Derrida’s reservations, and his often traditional, rhetorical use of the word, this thesis argues that there is operative and performed in Derrida’s works a force of (dis)connection and non-belonging that is structural irony. While the lexeme may not take a dominant role in Derrida’s texts, nor operate as one of Derrida’s quasi-transcendental signifiers, Derrida’s work is a serious, extended engagement with structural irony. As he said, “I take irony seriously; I take the problem of irony very seriously. And we need some irony,

⁶ Nicholas Royle, *In Memory of Jacques Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009) 105.

⁷ Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) 32.

that is, something which challenges the commonsensical concepts, and you can't do this without some irony".⁸ However, while reading Derrida's work as a performance of and engagement with structural irony, this thesis *does not* argue that irony is the *mot juste* or transcendental signifier for deconstruction. It *does not* propose that irony is the proper, eidetic term either for deconstruction or the effects of the divided mark. Irony cannot be eidetic as, like *pharmakon*, it is not a substance in and of itself – nor, in fact, strictly a structure, but a force of weakness that results from the divided mark. It is a good way of approaching deconstruction and the mark, but not the only way.

Readings associating Derrida and irony too often exhibit a marked tendency to absorb both into a vague amalgamation of German romanticism and postmodernism, whereby the ironic, Derridean text parodies philosophical and literary traditions while reflecting with cynical distance on an undifferentiated mess of discourses. Deconstruction is reduced to a self-indulgent, self-fulfilling project of scepticism, nihilism and indeterminacy. Thus Arnold Krupat describes Derrida as one of those "poststructuralist, postmodernist, or neopragmatic ironic anti-philosophers" whose "rhetorical success" means that "any who wish to offer their own discourse ... as more than a 'persuasive fiction' has an uphill battle to fight".⁹ Habermas argues that Derrida's mixing of genres produces nothing more than an "all-devouring context" where the rhetorical is privileged over the logical, and sophistic tricks of style are used to undercut philosophical arguments.¹⁰ Even the likes of Ernst Behler and Claire Colebrook show an inclination to reduce Derrida to a satirical, genre-crossing, context-transgressing postmodernist. Hence Behler writes that

the style of postmodern writing and the reflexive, ironic mode of postmodern thinking is performed at its best in the texts of Jacques Derrida. Here, the end of modernity, or better, the infinite transgression of

⁸ Jacques Derrida, "Derrida: Screenplay", *Derrida: Screenplay and Essays on the Film*, Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman et al (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005) 91. Spoken at the question and answer session following a lecture at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa, 1998.

⁹ Arnold Krupat, "An Apollonian Response", *Irony in Action: Anthropology, Practice, and the Moral Imagination*, ed. James W. Fernandez and Mary Taylor Huber (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001) 135.

¹⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Fredrick Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity, 1995) 190.

modernity, is not declared by a statement but enacted through performative writing and communicated indirectly.¹¹

And Colebrook:

One of the great achievements of Jacques Derrida's post-structuralism was its capacity to forge a path between ... two styles of irony: a satirical irony that attacks the conventions of a specific context, and a broader Romantic or transcendent irony that aims to think beyond context.¹²

Placing Derrida within a tradition of thinkers of irony provides a radical extension to that tradition of irony and non-thetic modes of thought and writing, while also affording a new and important way of understanding the structures within Derrida's *oeuvre*. It does not propose that Derrida's texts and modes of engagement are reducible or equivalent to those of the thinkers addressed in this work. It argues instead that tracing the descriptions and performances of structural irony through these writers affords a profitable way of understanding both deconstruction and irony.

Writing so as to acknowledge the structural reworking(s) of irony involves a certain style, an engagement with a work that recognises within its singularity a force of reworking that explodes the text beyond its author, form, language, event. That is, each singular event is both produced and undone by the potential of the mark to be hyphenated to itself and other marks through infinite, aleatory (dis)connections. This "style", which is also form or structure, performs a certain contamination of genres and discourses; the philosophical and the literary, the public and the private, the fictional and the autobiographical, etc. Structural irony is therefore neither specifically humorous nor specifically bleak, although it can be manipulated to produce laughter and tears.

Irony as (simply) the jocular or facetious is usually read as a form of (deliberate) ambiguity whose semantic opposition is such that its disjunctions give rise to laughter. As one theorist of humour notes,

One problem with irony is that the intention of the ironist must be made clear, that is, people must realise that someone means the opposite of what he or she says. Sometimes people don't "get" the irony, and take what was

¹¹ Ernst Behler, *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990) 30.

¹² Claire Colebrook, *Irony* (London: Routledge, 2004) 95.

said ironically in a literal way. So it is a dangerous method of generating humour.¹³

Irony in this reading is simply a deliberate, wry commentary on the difference between expectation and outcome – an anacoluthic interruption of syntax or situation. Irony understood as scepticism or nihilism – which is addressed through Kierkegaard in the first chapter and (misreadings of) Schlegel in the fourth – is a deliberate, black commentary on the impossibility of any congruence between expectation and outcome – an *inescapable* anacoluthic interruption of syntax or situation. However, as this thesis argues, irony is neither laughter nor tears but a force of weakness potentially productive of both. It shares the effect of “everyday anamnesis”¹⁴ that Simon Critchley sees in the humorous, but is neither essentially frivolous nor essentially bleak. Irony is the hyphenation of extremes, the movement of conjunction and disjunction between marks, and as such cannot be thought of as a single pole or point. Thus when Derrida says that “I have this attitude that some people must have perceived as double, of emancipation, revolt, irony, and at the same time of scrupulous fidelity” (TS 43), the irony is not the single position he posits but *the double attitude/movement itself*. The countermovements of irony name the unmasterable excess that the mark produces. Thus, as Royle writes, “No doubt there remains the irony of Derrida as a grandmaster of non-mastery. Perhaps an especially helpful way of exploring this irony would be in reckoning with the singularity of his work as an affirmation of non-belonging”.¹⁵

In “The Concept of Irony” de Man lists three commonly practised modes of defusing irony. The first reduces irony to an aesthetic practice or artistic device that enables the ironist to achieve an aesthetic distance from the material. The second rewrites irony as the dialectic of self-reflection; the self reflecting on itself. The third absorbs irony into a dialectic of history, so that it becomes a series of ironic moments within a dialectical pattern of historical progression. To answer the first, structural irony can, and usually does, manifest itself as a certain style of the non-propositional and non-thetic, but it is not simply of the aesthetic, as the aesthetic is not separated from the functional or theoretical or philosophical. Nor

¹³ Arthur Asa Berger, *An Anatomy of Humor* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1993) 40-41.

¹⁴ Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002) 86.

¹⁵ Nicholas Royle, *Jacques Derrida* (London: Routledge, 2003) 146.

is an ironic style of distance, but an engagement with the potentialities of language. In response to the last, structural irony, most noticeably in Derrida, steps away from linear, dialectical progression and sees the lines of influence and inheritance as crossed and multi-directional.

In response to the second, irony has no part in immediate or direct reflection; in mirroring it does not (simply) alter or distort reality, but destabilises the notion of a separate and uncontaminated category of origin or authenticity which is then represented or reflected. Irony is the condition of possibility and impossibility of self-reflection – the face it reflects is never the face of the proper or the same. The positing of ironic language is always catachrestic, always a mispositing, or a positing of alterity. The skewed reflection of the self turns subject to subjectile, turning the text to alterity while turning every theoretical work into an autobiography.

While irony is often accused of being unethical or immoral in its opacity and lack of a stable, definite stance, Derrida's irony occasions an engagement with the world that is responsible, but a responsibility that recognises its own "impossibilities", and is therefore *(ir)responsible*. (Ir)responsibility does not provide explicit prescriptions for ethical behaviour, nor rules for a moral life, but is an openness to alterity, a step towards the other. The responsible step is always an ironic step, as not only can the subject never predict with absolute certainty where her foot will land, her responsible step of hospitality towards one is an irresponsible step of hostility away from another. Which does not condone or promote stasis or inaction, but cautions that each step taken should never be glorified as the best and only step.

With the exception of the first, which gives a brief history of irony, each chapter presents a (re)reading of a thinker who theorises and/or performs a specific mode of structural irony, and whose work is then related to Derrida's engagement/performance of related structures and concerns. While the focus remains throughout on non-propositional modes of argument and communication, this non-thetic "style" or "tone" is highlighted at the end of each chapter, which concludes with a reading of one of Derrida's more "written", "performative" or "literary" texts. These texts are chosen as they perform or explicate the modes of structural irony outlined in each chapter, and for an engagement with the writers addressed.

The first chapter of this thesis gives a brief outline of the history of irony from uses in Attic Greece to postmodern irony. It gives an overview of the philosophical, rhetorical and critical theories of irony, with a concentration on distinguishing the structural irony of Derrida's texts from postmodern irony.

Chapter two establishes the structures through which irony will be addressed, beginning by differentiating Derrida's irony from that of the (other) great deconstructive theorist of irony – Paul de Man. While clearly influenced by de Man's "The Rhetoric of Temporality", Derrida not only prefigures de Man's corrected version in "The Concept of Irony", but steps beyond it to an irony of the *perverformative*, a contaminated constative/performative force/weakness which exceeds propositional exegesis, overstepping boundaries between literature and philosophy. The origins of the terms "parabasis" and "permanent parabasis" are outlined, and a new mode of transgressive, interruptive parabasis proposed. Against Marian Hobson's syntactical irony an irony of parataxis is proposed, and the structures of hyphenation and the anacoluthon outlined. The chapter ends with an exploration of the irony performed in Derrida's reading of Francis Ponge's "Fable".

Chapter three traces the lines of connection and inheritance between the irony of Plato/Socrates and the ironic functioning of deconstruction. Socratic questioning – *elenchus* – is understood as a structural mode of interruption and catachrestic reflection, while the falsely separated Platonic irony that of an author's attempt to suppress irony through irony. The chapter closes with a reading of the ironic, catastrophic turns of "Envois". A performance of parataxis, the cards always say more than was intended, always express more than their content directly signifies, always sign to non-thetic excess. Reading "Envois" is an ironic, paratactic exercise of interruption and conjunction that disrupts identity, legacy, the author and the system.

Against Wayne Booth's grim warning – "fellow romantics, do not push the irony too far, or you will pass from the joyful laughter of *Tristram Shandy* into Teutonic gloom. Read Schlegel"¹⁶ – chapter four relates Derrida's texts to Friedrich Schlegel's fragmented irony and the parabolic interruption of Blanchot. Traditionally Romantic irony is understood as self-limitation or self-destruction; this chapter argues that the movement of Schlegel's irony prevents it from ever

¹⁶ Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974) 211.

being simply or only a negative force, and is rather an infinite and shifting movement between a range of the positive and negative. The persistent fracturation of the work – “Interrupted, it goes on” (ED 59) – found in Blanchot is the ironic functioning of permanent parabasis, and the ironic fragmentation – paratactic hyphenation – of Schlegel and Blanchot is found in the *reworking* of Derrida’s fragments and aphorisms. Irony is seen to pertain to a certain syncopated or contrapuntal time and contradictory citationality. Derrida’s essay “*Che cos’è la poesia*” is read as a performance of “poematic” singularity that interrupts and engages with fragmentary, romantic irony.

Chapter five presents an “ethical interruption” (OB 44) which argues that Levinas’s ethics and Derrida’s (ir)responsibility function through irony. A non-programmatic engagement with the other is performed through a language and style resting heavily on interruption, disjunction, repetition, a certain scepticism and fragmentary seriality – irony. The chapter concludes with a reading of the fragmentary ending to “At This Very Moment”.

Chapter six specifically engages with the changes that arose in what is referred to as Derrida’s “later” style, proposing that an unfortunate overexposure to the *laws of the interview* contributed to this change. As his career progressed Derrida was obliged to succumb more frequently to the laws of the interview – to present his work orally, reductively, anecdotally and quickly, concentrating on accessibility, transparency, and pedagogy. As Derrida increasingly read himself he developed a style that is best referred to as autoimmune, a contradictory movement of protection/exposure that is ironic. The interview is revisited in the autobiographical inter-view, which is seen to be an ironic, parabolic, paratactic, fragmentary work, and *Circumfession* is hence read as exemplary of the ironic text.

The History of Irony

Irony and Origins

The terms now usually translated as irony – *εἰρωνεία* (*eirōneia*), *εἰρων* (*eirōn*) and their derivatives – first appeared in the corpus of Attic texts, where they denoted thoroughly negative qualities, often of low, sly cunning. In *Wasps*, *Birds* and *Clouds* Aristophanes used them in reference to falsity and deceit, and in Demosthenes' texts they referred to citizens who prevaricate to avoid civic duty.¹ In *Laws* Plato goes so far as to prescribe death for ironists, while in the *Sophist* *eirōnes* denotes those imposters, hypocrites and sophists who use language as an art in itself, with no involvement in a greater truth. Despite this, throughout Plato's dialogues it is Socrates who is most commonly associated with irony, an irony of dissimulation or self-deprecation.² Socratic irony is typically connected to pedagogy, as Socrates' form of questioning – *elenchus* – involved a feigned ignorance which caused his interlocutors to stumble over the inconsistencies of their own arguments, and therefore, ideally, to recognise their lack of knowledge. Despite the intricacies of Socrates' arguments, Socratic irony is most often read as a basic inversion of meaning that was neither malicious nor intended to deceive, but deployed to confuse the interlocutor in order to awaken him. Socrates' irony is also thought of, however, as the first instance of an ironic life. As G. G. Sedgewick writes: "Imagine understatement expanded into the principle of a whole life and you have grasped, in the large, a notion of the most famous and noble of all the ironies – the irony of Socrates".³

Influenced by Plato's depiction of Socrates, the ironist in Aristotle occupies a somewhat ambiguous position. In *Rhetoric* Aristotle describes how the use of equivocal or incongruous terms can be seen as derisive, and inspire anger in interlocutors "at those mocking them when they are being serious; for mockery [*eirōneia*] is contemptuous".⁴ However, the ironic form of mockery was also a witty and urbane mode: "Mockery [*eirōneia*] is more gentlemanly than

¹ For more on the origins of the term see Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 23.

² Socratic and Schlegelian irony are discussed in detail in chapters three and four respectively; therefore the introduction simply presents *typical or traditional interpretations*.

³ G. G. Sedgewick, *Of Irony: Especially in Drama* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1948) 9.

⁴ Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civil Discourse*, trans. George A. Kennedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 2.2.1379b.

buffoonery [*bōmolokhia*]; for the mocker makes a joke for his own amusement, the buffoon for the amusement of others”.⁵ In *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle distinguishes between the *alazon* – boaster – and the *eirōn* – ironist, although *eirōn* is often now translated as self-deprecator. Aristotle’s *eirōn* has a moral superiority over the *alazon*, as the *eirōn* self-deprecatingly presents her worth as less than it is, while the *alazon* attempts to increase it. Directly describing Socrates’ disclaimer of his knowledge and virtues as ironic, Aristotle consolidated the movement to redeem irony.⁶

By the 1st Century BC irony had become a clever and engaging mode of exposition; Cicero describes Socrates as “fascinating and witty, a genial conversationalist; he was what the Greeks call *εἰρων* [*eirōn*] – in every conversation, pretending to need information and professing admiration for the wisdom of his companion”.⁷ In *De Oratore* Socrates’ “assumed simplicity” is a “choice variety of humour ... blended with austerity, and suited to public speaking as well as to the conversation of gentlemen”.⁸ The “ironical inversion of verbal meanings”⁹ is described as a pleasurable form of humour:

Irony too gives pleasure, when your words differ from your thoughts, not ... when you assert exactly the contradictory ... but when the whole tenor of your speech shows you to be solemnly jesting, what you think differing continuously from what you say.¹⁰

For Cicero, irony is not simply the *direct* inversion of meaning, but the act of “saying one thing and meaning another”.¹¹ Thus while it can be used, for example, to condemn via overblown tributes,¹² the intended meaning is not merely the opposite of what was expressed.

⁵ Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 3.18.1419b.

⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Roger Crisp (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000) 4.7.1127b.

⁷ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Officiis*, trans. Walter Miller (London: William Heinemann, 1913) 1.30.108.

⁸ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Oratore*, trans. E. W. Sutton and H. Rackham (London: William Heinemann, 1942) 2.67.270.

⁹ Cicero, *De Oratore* 2.65.261.

¹⁰ Cicero, *De Oratore* 2.67.269.

¹¹ Cicero, *De Oratore* 3.53.203.

¹² Cicero, *De Oratore* 2.67.272.

The identification of irony with humour is continued in Quintilian, where even “the most severe form of irony [is] a kind of jest”.¹³ Irony can be used “to blame with a pretence of praise and to praise with a pretence of blame”,¹⁴ it is feigned ignorance¹⁵ or misrepresentation¹⁶ that is employed to “enhance the elegance of ... style”.¹⁷ However, the subtlety of Cicero’s disjunction between words and meaning is lost in Quintilian; irony is *antiphrasis*, a mode in which “the meaning is *contrary* to that suggested by the words” [emphasis added],¹⁸ although Quintilian does reject the translation of *εἰρων* as simply “dissimulation”.¹⁹ While the potential for excess is reduced in Quintilian’s formulation of irony, irony proves nonetheless impossible to restrict to a single category, belonging “to *figures of thought* just as much as to tropes”.²⁰

Irony involving a *figure* does not differ from the irony which is a trope, as far as its *genus* is concerned, since in both cases we understand something which is the opposite of what is actually said; on the other hand, a careful consideration of the *species* of *irony* will soon reveal the fact that they differ. In the first place, the *trope* is franker in its meaning, and, despite the fact that it implies something other than it says, makes no pretence about it. For the context as a rule is perfectly clear. ... But in the *figurative* form of irony the speaker disguises his entire meaning, the disguise being apparent rather than confessed. For in the *trope* the conflict is purely verbal, while in the *figure* the meaning, and sometimes the whole aspect of our case, conflicts with the language and the tone of voice adopted; nay, a man’s whole life may be coloured with *irony*, as was the case with Socrates, who was called an *ironist* because he assumed the role of an ignorant man lost in wonder at the wisdom of others.²¹

Thus Quintilian’s irony has a relatively simple tropological form – one or two words whose meaning doesn’t seem quite right: “Brutus is an honourable man” – a slightly less direct figurative form: an entire book or essay like Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” – and the pervasive figure of irony as espoused by Socrates, that of an entire life. Hence Quintilian’s definition of irony as a movement of direct and simple inversion becomes immediately problematised by his own

¹³ Marcus Fabius Quintilian, *The Institutio Oratoria*, trans. H. E. Butler (London: William Heinemann, 1920-2) 6.3.68.

¹⁴ Quintilian 8.6.54.

¹⁵ Quintilian 9.2.46.

¹⁶ Quintilian 6.3.91.

¹⁷ Quintilian 9.2.96.

¹⁸ Quintilian 8.6.54.

¹⁹ Quintilian 9.2.44.

²⁰ Quintilian 9.1.3.

²¹ Quintilian 9.2.44-46.

example; Socrates' life involved masks and subterfuge, indirect communication and feigned ignorance, and neither his actions nor his dialogues can be resolved through direct inversion.

In *Ironia: Medieval and Renaissance Ideas on Irony* Dilwyn Knox proposes that irony was a relatively common stylistic feature of Medieval and Renaissance texts, although it continued to be defined as saying the opposite of what is meant or, as he paraphrases, “*Yronia* denies what it says”.²² Delivery and intonation continued to be clues to irony and use and, as he claims, its dissimulation was never intended to deceive, though it could certainly mock. According to Norman Knox, the first record of irony in English – *yronye* – appeared in *Thordynary of Crysten men* in 1502,²³ which stated that self-deprecatory dissimulation “may be mortall synne and such synne is named yronye”.²⁴ In the Restoration and Augustinian periods irony was a verbal device used to express praise-by-blame, and it was not until the 1720s, “after the clear-cut ironies of Defoe and Swift and the constant, obtrusive ironies of controversial pamphlets and periodicals, that *irony* became common in the literary and general discourse of the day”.²⁵ However, it was the group of young scholars in Germany who became known as the Jena Romantics who gave irony a complex and overtly philosophical form.

Irony and Philosophy

German Romantic irony, discussed fully in chapter four, was primarily theorised and performed by Friedrich Schlegel in a number of dialogues, essays and fragments published in the journal *Athenäum* (1798-1801). Schlegelian irony is most often described as an appreciation of the incomprehensible, incommunicable chaos of the world, and an oscillation between self-creation and self-destruction. An ironic artist is portrayed as one labouring under an awareness of the limitations of the self, one who creates, pouring herself into her work, while at the same time reflecting on the insignificance and insufficiency of the work. The ironic work should be self-reflexive – work and theory on that work – fragmentary and full of contradictory themes which cannot be synthesised or harmonised, while the

²² Dilwyn Knox, *Ironia: Medieval and Renaissance Ideas on Irony* (Leiden: Brill, 1989) 37.

²³ Norman Knox, *The Word “Irony” and its Context, 1500-1755* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1961) 7.

²⁴ N. Knox 41.

²⁵ N. Knox 8.

ironist espouses a mood of superior, mocking alienation and sceptical awareness.²⁶ Schlegel's irony was misread by many of his peers, and continues to be misinterpreted, though perhaps without the violence and personal animosity of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.

Hegel was extremely strongly opposed to the irony posited by Schlegel and the Jena Romantics, and was sufficiently roused to condemn irony and "the father of irony" – Schlegel – in passionate terms: "This irony was invented by Friedrich von Schlegel, and many others have babbled about it or are now babbling about it again".²⁷ As he wrote in *Aesthetics*:

irony implies the absolute negativity in which the subject is related to himself in the annihilation of everything specific and one-sided; but since this annihilation ... affects not only, as in comedy, what is inherently null which manifests itself in its hollowness, but equally everything excellent and solid, it follows that irony as this art of annihilating everything everywhere, like that heart-felt longing, acquires, at the same time, in comparison with the true Ideal, the aspect of inner inartistic lack of restraint.²⁸

Hegel was deeply troubled by the absolute, independent instrumentality and power of the ego as posited by Fichte and used by Schlegel: if all is created by the subjectivity of the ego, then all can be destroyed by it, and nothing has any reality beyond the ego. Hegel read Fichte's theory of living artistically to presuppose that all action and expression is mere show, that there is no earnestness and nothing is genuine. Since all is of the subject's creation, all is false and fake. Irony and the ironist become god-like, creating and destroying at whim, causing "the vanity of everything factual, moral, and of intrinsic worth, the nullity of everything objective and absolutely valid".²⁹ The supposedly superior position of the ironist is revealed as a false and empty pre-eminence, as her artificial elevation leads to isolation, to a craving for the solid and substantial and to a longing to escape the vanity and impotence of irony. Thus, if as an ironist I attempt to relate to something objective,

²⁶ Again, the reading of Schlegel presented here is the traditional summary of Schlegelian irony, *not* the reading this thesis will forward in chapter four.

²⁷ G. W. F. Hegel *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) 66.

²⁸ Hegel *Aesthetics*, 160.

²⁹ Hegel *Aesthetics*, 66.

it vanishes at the same moment before my eyes, and so I hover over a pit of nothingness, summoning shapes from the depths and annihilating them. This supreme type of subjectivism can emerge only in a period of advanced culture when faith has lost its seriousness, and its essence is simply “all is vanity”.³⁰

Hegel presented Schlegelian irony as an oscillation that eventually causes the character to destroy itself: “if an individual comes forth in a determinate way, this determinacy is at once to pass over into its opposite, and his character is therefore to display nothing but the nullity of its determinacy and itself”.³¹ Even the use of irony as a means of expressing the excess or the inexpressible is dismissed by Hegel as inept and inartistic. The ironic mode of writing simply disguises a lack of skill: “in F. von Schlegel’s poems at the time when he imagined himself a poet, what is unsaid is given out as the best thing of all; yet this ‘poetry of poetry’ proved itself to be precisely the flattest prose”.³² In condemning Schlegel Hegel does not outright denounce all irony, as this would censure Plato and Socrates. Instead he argued that Plato used the term simply

to describe a way of speaking which Socrates employed in conversation when defending the Idea of truth and justice against the conceit of the Sophists and the uneducated. What he treated ironically, however, was only their type of mind, not the Idea itself. Irony is only a manner of talking against *people*.³³

Hegel’s polemic against Schlegelian irony inspired Kierkegaard’s master’s thesis *The Concept of Irony: with Constant Reference to Socrates*. For him irony “is not this or that phenomenon but the totality of existence [*Tilværelse*] which it considers *sub specie ironiæ*. To this extent one sees the propriety of the Hegelian characterisation of irony as infinite absolute negativity”.³⁴ Irony

is negativity because it only negates; it is infinite because it negates not this or that phenomenon; and it is absolute because it negates by virtue of a

³⁰ G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1952) 258.

³¹ Hegel, *Aesthetics* 243. For a brief yet interesting outline on the differences – and similarities – between Schlegel’s irony and Hegel’s dialectics, see Ernst Behler’s *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity*.

³² Hegel, *Aesthetics* 296.

³³ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right* 101.

³⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony with Constant Reference to Socrates*, trans. Lee M. Capel (London: Collins, 1966) 271.

higher which is not. Irony establishes nothing, for that which is to be established lies behind it.³⁵

The negation that occurs in irony is not a process that leads to something; irony has as its goal only irony. For Kierkegaard irony was a negative concept that resists positive positing; it lies outside our understanding, and definitions are impossible. Irony cannot be reduced, however, to a form of philosophical doubt, as when one doubts one seeks to understand an object, whereas when one ironises one seeks “to get outside the object ... by becoming conscious at every moment that the object has no reality”.³⁶ As we shall see below, even though he is rarely referred to by postmodernists, Kierkegaard’s irony bears many similarities to postmodern irony.

For Kierkegaard irony and subjectivity were strongly linked: he deemed Socrates’ injunction to “know thyself” to be the introduction of subjectivity, and through that of irony: “when subjectivity asserts itself, irony appears”.³⁷ Unlike the Hegelian dialectic, however, the Socratic dialectic begins and ends with ignorance, replacing supposed knowledge with “negative infinity”.³⁸ Socrates’ ignorance, and his knowledge of this ignorance, never becomes a positive content, and in this lack of a positive thesis is ironic. It goes nowhere but turns in on itself and on the subject: “Socrates appears as one who stands poised ready to leap into something, yet at every moment instead of leaping into this ‘other’, he leaps aside and back into himself”.³⁹ The Socratic identity is thus ironic in its self-reflexivity, without its revolution leading to a positive whole.

For Kierkegaard Socratic irony and German Romantic irony were essentially the same thing; their differences were simply historical. Socratic irony had the positive effect of introducing subjectivity, but the German Romantics reintroduced irony to a world already familiar with the power of the self, and so subjective freedom became “an eccentric subjectivity, a subjectivity raised to the second power”.⁴⁰ Thus while irony, for Kierkegaard, is the negation of all historical actuality, in the case of Socrates “it was not actuality altogether that he negated, but the given actuality of a certain age, of substantiality as embodied in

³⁵ Kierkegaard 278.

³⁶ Kierkegaard 274.

³⁷ Kierkegaard 280.

³⁸ Kierkegaard 231.

³⁹ Kierkegaard 192.

⁴⁰ Kierkegaard 292.

Hellas”.⁴¹ Romantic irony is the subjectivity of subjectivity, a version of Socratic irony that is completely adrift, free from every historical actuality. Thus “the subject is negatively free. The actuality which shall give him content is not, hence he is free from the restraint in which the given actuality binds him, yet negatively free and as such hovering, because there nothing is which binds him”.⁴² Freed from historical actuality, irony and the ironic subject become temporally unbound, as the past becomes fictional or mythical.

Irony is the play with nothingness; as reality ceases to become real for the ironist everything becomes invalid, a vain fabrication. Kierkegaard’s (German Romantic) ironist dons mask after mask; in the multiplicity of possible personalities the ironist loses all stability and continuity of identity. Kierkegaard understood the German Romantic ironic life to be a life without essence, whose poiesis or production produces nothing at all. As Kierkegaard writes: “the ironist does not have the new within his power, it might be asked how he destroys the old, and to this it must be answered: he destroys the given actuality by the given actuality itself”.⁴³ A parodic quality that is strongly present in postmodern irony, the ironist turns life against itself, and finds that it ends in the void of aporia. In poetically producing herself, the ironist produces nothing, and makes her life a bare emptiness.

And yet for Kierkegaard irony is not to be wholly disregarded as dangerously immoral. When mastered, irony “limits, renders finite, defines, and thereby yields truth, actuality, and content; it chastens and punishes and thereby imparts stability, character and consistency”.⁴⁴ Mastered, irony becomes an ethical category, so much so that “He who does not understand irony and has no ear for its whisperings lacks *eo ipso* what might be called the absolute beginning of the personal life”.⁴⁵ A poet has mastered irony when the poetic work becomes a part of her own development, when her existence as a poet becomes part of her actuality, of the reality of her life. Kierkegaard uses the examples of Goethe and a Professor Heiberg, and regarding the latter he writes:

⁴¹ Kierkegaard 287-88.

⁴² Kierkegaard 279.

⁴³ Kierkegaard 279.

⁴⁴ Kierkegaard 338.

⁴⁵ Kierkegaard 339.

while almost every line he has written affords an example of irony's inner economy at work, there is also present throughout all his works a self-conscious endeavour to order and assign each particular its place in the whole. Thus irony is mastered, reduced to a moment: the essence is none other than the phenomenon.⁴⁶

Balance is restored in the case of responsible, productive, *mastered irony*; the external and the internal, meaning and appearance (re)align, and the moment relates to a greater whole. The subject becomes resituated within her historical actuality, and recognises that irony, rather than an end in itself, is "the negative way, not the truth but the way".⁴⁷

Irony and Criticism

While ostensibly different in philosophical emphasis and approach, the next four critics are unified by their common reading of irony as a *vital literary force*. György Lukács' work on irony in *The Theory of the Novel* sees it as the disjunction between real and ideal, and the novel the site of the ironic connection between the disordered world and the desire for knowledge and totality. G. G. Sedgwick's dramatic irony is the tool of the human or godly creator, while Northrop Frye's irony is firmly of the "real" and human world. For Sedgwick ironic distance generates sympathy, while for Frye it instils superiority. For Brooks irony is the contradictions that arise from the poem's content, and therefore a vital productive force. Irony for Frye is a mode of Romantic *unromanticising*, as it shows the world to be disorderly and chaotic, with none of the order or sense of the myth or romance. Interestingly, Frye and Lukács are in this sense more similar than might be thought – both see irony as a movement between romance and reality, though Frye's sense of the inherent disorder is far less Romantic than Lukács.

In *The Theory of the Novel* Lukács investigates an art form that has become problematic because reality has become problematic; while the Hellenic age existed in glorious organic unity, the early twentieth century subsists in a reality that is essentially incomplete, non-organic and abandoned by God, that is,

⁴⁶ Kierkegaard 337.

⁴⁷ Kierkegaard 340. Interestingly, given the use throughout Kierkegaard's text of a language that mocks where it praises and lauds where it denigrates, the above description is a clear echo of Schlegel's work on Goethe in "On Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*". Like Schlegel, Kierkegaard subscribes to the ironic practice of work and theory on that work, a skewed use and performance, though unlike Schlegel emphasises totality.

any authority or reality that is complete. Lukács' novel is an expression of "transcendental homelessness",⁴⁸ and the novel's hero is lost in a fragmentary, inorganic world that has no coherence in meaning or causality. The novelist will always be an ironic novelist, as she is split between a dogmatic self that strives to create a work that is an ordered totality, and an empirical self that recognises the general absence of ordered totality. She will always be alienated from her creation, the ironic hero will always be alienated from meaning, and any attempt to understand the world will be belied by the world itself.

As the "self-correction of the world's fragility",⁴⁹ irony creates an artistic or aesthetic web of fragments, altering reality's acausality and irresolvable movements into a form connected and yet isolated, meaningless and meaningful. Irony thus enables a perspective that sees the fragmentary (in)dependence of the parts on the whole, although their relationship to the totality is not an organic one, "but a conceptual one which is abolished again and again".⁵⁰ Nonetheless, through what Lukács describes as "skilfully ironic compositional tact",⁵¹ the contingent and discreet fragments that comprise the novel – characters and actions – are inserted into the whole in such a way that their compositional significance transcends their simple presence, and so the illusion of organic qualities is given. Hence Lukács writes that "The composition of the novel is the paradoxical fusion of heterogeneous and discrete components into an organic whole which is then abolished over and over again".⁵²

The ironic novelist has realised that the wish for a mimetic form of art, where the empirical and the ideal, or the real and its internalisations are intertwined, is a fantasy. A double irony lies in both the hopelessness of the attempt, and the hopelessness of its abandonment. Thus while irony shows reality as victorious, it also reveals that reality is nothing without the unreal world of ideas.

Irony, with intuitive double vision, can see where God is to be found in a world abandoned by God; irony sees the lost utopian home of the idea that has become an ideal, and yet at the same time it understands that the ideal

⁴⁸ György Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: a Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1971) 41.

⁴⁹ Lukács 75.

⁵⁰ Lukács 76.

⁵¹ Lukács 77.

⁵² Lukács 84. In this sense Lukács is quite close to Schlegel.

is subjectively and psychologically conditioned, because that is its only possible form of existence; irony, itself demonic, apprehends the demon that is within the subject as a metasubjective essentiality, and therefore, when it speaks of the adventures of errant souls in an inessential, empty reality, it intuitively speaks of past gods and gods that are to come; irony has to seek the only world that is adequate to it along the *via dolorosa* of interiority, but is doomed never to find it there. ... Irony, the self-surmounting of a subjectivity that has gone as far as it was possible to go, is the highest freedom that can be achieved in a world without God.⁵³

Irony for Lukács is that which enables representation of the self-contradictory state of reality. The subject is caught between the real and the ideal, and irony invests both the empirical and conceptual with fragmentary and paradoxical connections that bind without eradicating their discreet nature and unify without creating a totality. Irony is the awareness of the distance between art and reality, of the disjunction between understanding and the object understood, and of their simultaneous inseparability.

According to G. G. Sedgewick's *Of Irony: Especially in Drama* the theatre is always ironic, as the audience oversee the spectacle of a life over which they have no control. This instils in the audience a "sort of paradoxical sympathy; for, though it is *sympathy*, it is likewise *detached*".⁵⁴ *General dramatic irony* is thus

the fusion in a spectator's mind of superior knowledge and detached sympathy ... *The whole attitude of the interested spectator is ironic*; by the very fact that he is such a spectator, he is an ironist. And "general irony" is a name for the proper pleasure of the theatre.⁵⁵

Dramatic irony is also tragic irony, and *specific dramatic irony* differs only from general dramatic irony in that it is overt. While Sedgewick agrees that ambiguity is a common and important form of irony, he concentrates on the irony of ignorance, the tragedy that occurs when a character is wholly unaware of her fate: "The irony of the scene [in *Electra*] is rooted, not in the double meaning of the queen's words, but in her ignorance of the conflict in which she is a principal and of which the spectator is tensely aware".⁵⁶ Thus, dramatic irony "*is the sense of*

⁵³ Lukács 92-93.

⁵⁴ Sedgewick 32.

⁵⁵ Sedgewick 33.

⁵⁶ Sedgewick 36.

contradiction felt by spectators of a drama who see a character acting in ignorance of his condition".⁵⁷

Iago is Sedgewick's perfect example of an ironic villain – his language is rarely directly overdetermined, but all too often literally and unambiguously true. His is the irony of apparent understatement, as he tells a version of the truth whose mildness appears to shelter another, and thereby makes the truth appear to be far graver. As Sedgewick writes regarding Sophocles: "the ironic language of Sophocles is not so much ambiguous as entirely *neutral*; it has of itself a deadly colourlessness that takes on any shade which the hearer may reflect into it".⁵⁸ Irony's force comes thus from the blank potentiality of language itself, the characters' differing states of ignorance, and the audience's sense of reminiscence and anticipation – irony's temporal disjunction – so that irony becomes "the sense of power brought to ruin and of divine relentlessness, the feeling of spectators who from their place of vantage may look back over the hideous myth".⁵⁹

In *The Well Wrought Urn* Cleanth Brooks writes:

irony is the most general term that we have for the kind of qualification which the various elements in a context receive from the context. ... Moreover, *irony* is our most general term for indicating that recognition of incongruities – which, again, pervades all poetry to a degree far beyond what our conventional criticism has been heretofore willing to allow.⁶⁰

For the New Critics irony described the pressure of the internal context or structure on the poem, and the co-existence of multiple and contradictory meanings. Irony was a structural element of incompatibilities and incongruities that brought richness and complexity – each part of the poem interacts with the general "internal" context or construct of the poem, resulting in the production of greater and varied meanings. Poetry is always ironic, but irony can also be overtly employed. According to Brooks modern poetry used irony because

there is the breakdown of a common symbolism; there is the general scepticism as to universals; not least important, there is the depletion and corruption of the very language itself. ... The modern poet has the task of

⁵⁷ Sedgewick 49.

⁵⁸ Sedgewick 62.

⁵⁹ Sedgewick 76.

⁶⁰ Cleanth Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase", *Critical Theory Since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971) 1039.

rehabilitating a tired and drained language so that it can convey meanings once more with force and with exactitude.⁶¹

Irony was therefore a productive structure within the poem that pushed the poem in numerous antithetical directions, thereby instilling within the poem an economic semantic excess. This excess, however, should not be thought to push the poem “beyond” itself – each work was very much a totality.

Like Sedgwick and Brooks, Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* sees irony as inherently literary or poetic:

The critics who tell us that the basis of poetic expression is irony, or a pattern of words that turns away from obvious (i.e., descriptive) meaning, are much closer to the facts of literary experience, at least on the literal level. The literary structure is ironic because “what it says” is always different in kind or degree from “what it means”. In discursive writing what is said tends to approximate, ideally to become identified with, what is meant.⁶²

While ironic modes present a world comprising absurd and incomprehensible coincidences, unintelligible motivations and improbable and inconclusive resolutions, this alien world is in fact “a vision of what in theology is called the fallen world, of simple humanity, man as natural man and in conflict with both human and non-human nature”.⁶³ Frye gives the example of a Chekov play, which presents a scene of absurdist realism, so that the “ironic play passes through a dead centre of complete realism, a pure mime representing human life without comment and without imposing any sort of dramatic form beyond what is required for simple exposition”.⁶⁴ Irony is the arbitrary nature of fate that makes the world unfathomable and unpredictable, and the ironic myth presents a realist parody of romance, as it is essentially “the application of romantic mythical forms to a more realistic content which fits them in unexpected ways. No one in a romance, Don Quixote protests, ever asks who pays for the hero’s accommodation”.⁶⁵ Thus we move from the heroic to the ironic, from the castle to the tavern, from the courts to the marketplace.⁶⁶ Interestingly, for Frye irony is marked by the absence of a

⁶¹ Brooks, “Irony as a Principle of Structure”, *Critical Theory Since Plato* 1046.

⁶² Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (London: Penguin, 1990) 81.

⁶³ Frye 285.

⁶⁴ Frye 285.

⁶⁵ Frye 223.

⁶⁶ He does however also note that the realism of ironic literature tends towards myth (140).

guiding, moralistic author: “the ironist fables without moralising, and has no object but his subject ... [as] sophisticated irony merely states, and lets the reader add the ironic tone himself”.⁶⁷ As he succinctly puts it: “Irony is consistent both with complete realism of content and with the suppression of attitude on the part of the author”.⁶⁸

Tragic irony for Frye is the study of tragic isolation from society, as one is dependent on chance and the arbitrary nature of life. Life takes on an inevitable irony – as the aleatory will occur – and an incongruous irony – the guilty will possess a certain innocence, and the innocent will have elements of guilt. Interestingly, given Derrida’s later use of the *pharmakon* and *pharmakos* in Plato, Frye describes the random victim of tragic irony as a scapegoat, or *pharmakos*. Thus, while watching, the audience feels ironically superior to the tragic anti-hero, and looks down onto a scene of entrapment and frustration.

The *pharmakos* is neither innocent nor guilty. He is innocent in the sense that what happens to him is far greater than anything he has done provokes, like the mountaineer whose shout brings down an avalanche. He is guilty in the sense that he is a member of a guilty society, or living in a world where such injustices are an inescapable part of existence. These two facts do not come together; they remain ironically apart.⁶⁹

Frye gives the example of Christ as the perfect innocent victim who bears society’s guilt, though Socrates also comes to mind, particularly given Kierkegaard’s subtle linking of the two.

In terms of the relation between irony and comedy, the most ironic phase of comedy is, according to Frye, when a “humorous society triumphs or remains undefeated,”⁷⁰ for example in *The Alchemist* or *The Beggar’s Opera*. An intense irony is one where the play ends with the dissolution of society following a form of inaction, as one might find in Beckett. In the paradox and incongruity of irony we find social norms overturned, expected plot progression and character development skewed, and anacoluthic upheavals. What Frye calls the “tragic irony of the fallen world”⁷¹ is a temporality turning in on itself, a world adrift even from linear time.

⁶⁷ Frye 41.

⁶⁸ Frye 224.

⁶⁹ Frye 41-42.

⁷⁰ Frye 178.

⁷¹ Frye 214.

Irony and Reconstruction

In the *Institutio Oratoria* Quintilian presents a method for recognising irony, which will be

made evident to the understanding either by the delivery, the character of the speaker or the nature of the subject. For if any one of these three is out of keeping with the words, it at once becomes clear that the intention of the speaker is other than what he actually says.⁷²

The works of D. C. Muecke and Wayne C. Booth are based on a similar approach, wherein they attempt to formalise the sub-species of irony, present ways of recognising these sub-categories, and therefore enable the reader to reduce irony's excessive possibilities to the meaning intended by the author. For Muecke, and indeed for Booth, "a work can be ironical only by intention: being ironical means deliberately being ironical".⁷³ Of course, events and situations can be unintentionally ironic, and an ironic authorial intention does not necessarily make the work ironic for the reader, but beyond these conceded points, Muecke's irony is always bound up with intentionality and the existence of a "real" meaning – that of the author. With an impressive if unhelpful drive to categorise Muecke divides irony into 3 grades – Overt Irony, Covert Irony, and Private Irony – and 4 modes – Impersonal Irony, Self-disparaging Irony, Ingénu Irony, and Dramatised Irony – where the grades depend on the degree to which real meaning is concealed, and the modes on the relationship between the ironist and irony. While Muecke concentrates on the resolution of ironies of concealed intention and "real" meaning, he also poses a philosophical, "noncorrective irony",⁷⁴ which does not have a definite position to which to return. This is associated with the general irony of an ironic life, although he stresses that "the ironist is not a philosopher. As, or like an artist, he sees the world 'aesthetically', that is, from the proper aesthetic distance but not outside the human context".⁷⁵ The ironies of art and the aesthetic are both a general and a Romantic irony, whereby one recognises, transcends and yet preserves incompatible elements, living, through art, inside and outside the world. Art will always fail to represent life, and exist split between

⁷² Quintilian 8.6.54.

⁷³ D. C. Muecke, *The Compass of Irony* (London: Methuen, 1969) 56-57.

⁷⁴ Muecke 25.

⁷⁵ Muecke 121.

conscious planning and unconscious spontaneous invention, as a communication and thing communicated, as meaningful in its relation to the ordinary thing and as pure meaningless existence in itself.

Booth opens his text *A Rhetoric of Irony* with the telling line “Every good reader must be, among other things, sensitive in detecting and reconstructing ironic meanings”.⁷⁶ Irony is normative, and the “correct” response to irony in a text is to solve the puzzle it presents, thereby arriving at the stable, knowable, intended meaning. Booth’s irony has “an on-off switch”⁷⁷ which, following a correct “reconstruction” flips back to the “original”, pre-ironic setting. The irony in the text is wholly of the author and depends “not on the ingenuity of the reader but on the intentions that constitute the creative act”.⁷⁸ Irony “is essentially ‘subtractive’”⁷⁹ as one works backwards, retracing (the author’s) steps, removing and discounting incompatible meanings until the correct one is reached. Hence Booth’s analogy of “reconstructing”:

I turn to the building trades, to “reconstruction”, implying the tearing down of one habitation and the building of another one on a different spot. In playing with the notion of reconstructed buildings and relocated inhabitants, we can see more clearly the almost incredible intricacy of the *pas de deux* that I reduced to “marks” and “steps” above.⁸⁰

In an interesting inversion of deconstruction and a possible allusion to parabasis in the use of different forms of “steps”, Booth’s reconstruction is the tearing down of an unstable structure to move towards a more secure edifice. The steps that one takes in irony’s “intricate intellectual dance”⁸¹ are steps through a range of markers that reveal truth: one finds hints in warnings from the author’s own voice in titles, epigraphs, disclaimers; in errors such as incorrect uses of popular expressions, inaccurate historical facts, skewed conventional judgements; in conflicting facts and information within the work; in clashes of style; and in conflicts of belief between those expressed and those believed to be held.⁸²

⁷⁶ Booth 1.

⁷⁷ Booth 81.

⁷⁸ Booth 91.

⁷⁹ Booth 177.

⁸⁰ Booth 33.

⁸¹ Booth 31.

⁸² Booth 49-76.

Under Booth's classifications ironies themselves range from the comprehensible "Stable-Covert-Local" to the indecipherable "Unstable-Overt-Infinite", which, however, still depends "on a silent act of reconstruction of the author's superior edifice, and on our ascent to dwell with him in silent communion while the 'meaningless' drama enacts itself down below, on the surface of things".⁸³ It is indicative of Booth's approach to irony that when discussing Socratic irony he speaks of "a platform on which Socrates, Phaedrus, Plato, and the reader can stand as they meditate on the rich ironies of the dialogue".⁸⁴ For Booth Socratic irony is self-correction, where the "inadequacies of one attempt lead inevitably to another one, and then to yet another".⁸⁵ Literal statements mislead, so the ironist simply uses mythological statements that attempt to come closer to truth.

Linda Hutcheon's 1995 work on irony – *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* – is, like Booth's and Muecke's, founded on the "how and why" of irony. However, her analysis of irony does not treat it in terms of poetics, criticism or philosophy, nor as a way of life, personal characteristic or mode of consciousness, but as a discursive political strategy that opens power relations in communication. Hutcheon's irony of *Irony's Edge* is very much grounded in intention, although she does allow the reader to produce irony: "all irony happens intentionally, whether the attribution be made by the encoder or decoder".⁸⁶ While Hutcheon's irony therefore has a certain egalitarianism, she is emphatic about the hierarchical nature of irony, as it creates a class of target or victim. Thus "irony *explicitly* sets up (and exists within) a relationship between ironist and audiences ... that is political in nature"⁸⁷ and dependent on power, authority and subordination. The communities involved in irony are inevitably, even when viewed positively, founded on exclusion, and the relationship between ironist and interpreter is dependent on mastery rather than mutual comprehension: "In the economy of exchange that we call irony, there is always a power imbalance that does not seem to come into play in the same way in a trope like metaphor, in part

⁸³ Booth 263.

⁸⁴ Booth 273.

⁸⁵ Booth 275.

⁸⁶ Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Practice of Irony* (London: Routledge, 1994) 118.

⁸⁷ Hutcheon, *Irony* 17.

because irony is simultaneously disguise and communication”.⁸⁸ While some suggest that irony creates divided communities, Hutcheon argues that irony occurs because of pre-existent discursive communities in which power and control are always unequally distributed.

Hutcheon stresses that as a mode of discursive politics, “the one thing irony would *not* seem to be is what it is usually claimed to be: a simple antiphrastic substitution of the unsaid (called the ‘ironic’ meaning) for its opposite, the said (called the literal meaning)”.⁸⁹ Irony occurs in the space *between* the said and unsaid, other and more than both. Thus at the end of an analysis of Branagh’s and Olivier’s versions of *Henry V*, Hutcheon writes that “the resulting edgy oscillation between the two [films] created a new meaning – the one I think is the real ‘ironic’ meaning”⁹⁰ – irony for Hutcheon is a palimpsestic excess resulting from intertextual interactions and contradictions. Reading the political effects and affects of irony, we see that it has, for Hutcheon, a protean polymorphism, or as her recurring metaphor underscores, an “edge” that enables it to be transideological, used by all against all, including an unexpected attack on the self. Hence irony is conservative and subversive, involving the emotive, necessitating a judgemental attitude, provoking reactions. Hutcheon’s irony does not free us from dogma and fixed destinations, as it never works in one direction, even the direction against a single direction. Taking every possible step, irony can only be approached by a knowledge of its context: “irony is one discursive strategy that both cannot be understood apart from its embodiment in context and also has trouble escaping the power relations evoked by its evaluative edge”.⁹¹

Derrida and Postmodern Irony

In keeping with the majority of theorists Linda Hutcheon describes postmodernism as intertextual, parodic, contradictory, provisional, heterogeneous, transgressive of generic divisions, ex-centric and marginal. Postmodernism is a pastiche, it forwards a fragmented subject, questions totalising systems and lacks historical or narrative continuity. Essentially, Hutcheon’s postmodernism is, as she writes, “fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably

⁸⁸ Hutcheon, *Irony* 95.

⁸⁹ Hutcheon, *Irony* 12.

⁹⁰ Hutcheon, *Irony* 88.

⁹¹ Hutcheon, *Irony* 90.

political”.⁹² As she also acknowledges, very few of these attributes are only to be found in postmodernism, and so she posits that “What is newer is the constant attendant irony”⁹³ found in the postmodern era’s relation to history and the past. Postmodernism *is* ironic, and what Hutcheon calls the “postmodernist ironic rethinking of history”⁹⁴ is the way in which irony marks “the difference from the past, but [whereby] the intertextual echoing simultaneously works to affirm – textually and hermeneutically – the connection with the past”.⁹⁵ The postmodern engagement with history is “always a critical reworking, never a nostalgic ‘return’”. Herein lies the governing role of irony in postmodernism”.⁹⁶ Postmodern irony gives rise to “historiographic metafiction”, a form of the postmodern novel which is self-reflexive and historically grounded, and which subverts conventions from within. The historiographic and the metafictional aspects of the text

ironise both metafictional (modernist) trust in the imaginative power and the closed, reflexive structures of art and also its opposite, history’s assumed correspondence between narration and event, between word and thing. This mutual critical irony functions as a mode of internalised self-conscious theorisation that is as paradoxical as any postmodern theory today: it inscribes and then undercuts both the autonomy of art and the referentiality of history in such a way that a new mode of questioning/compromise comes into being. And this contradictory mode, in both theory and practice (or in theory as practice and practice as theory), is what I want to call postmodernist.⁹⁷

Postmodernism is then the irony of the interaction of an (ironic) engagement with history with an (ironic) interaction with reflexivity. When Hutcheon refers to irony she refers repeatedly to the “ironic reworking of history”,⁹⁸ but also to the “Ironic inversion of biographical conventions”,⁹⁹ “ironic discontinuity ... at the heart of continuity”,¹⁰⁰ “ironic contact” and “ironic contamination”,¹⁰¹ the “irony that allows critical distancing”¹⁰² and the “ironically undercut”.¹⁰³ In *A Poetics of*

⁹² Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988) 4.

⁹³ Hutcheon, *Poetics* x.

⁹⁴ Hutcheon, *Poetics* 39.

⁹⁵ Hutcheon, *Poetics* 125.

⁹⁶ Hutcheon, *Poetics* 4.

⁹⁷ Hutcheon, *Poetics* 56.

⁹⁸ Hutcheon, *Poetics* 5.

⁹⁹ Hutcheon, *Poetics* 9.

¹⁰⁰ Hutcheon, *Poetics* 11.

¹⁰¹ Hutcheon, *Poetics* 29.

¹⁰² Hutcheon, *Poetics* 89.

Postmodernism irony is the point of difference at the heart of similarity that allows for parodic and critical reworkings, so that the use of irony to implicate and yet critique is seen by Hutcheon as “distinctly paradoxical and postmodern”.¹⁰⁴ Hutcheon’s postmodern irony is a switch that once thrown illumines a scene in a different, wry, paradoxical light.¹⁰⁵

Derrida’s work is all too often read within the parameters of a postmodern irony in keeping with Hutcheon’s. The calculated transgression of the law of genres both analysed and performed within his texts is viewed as a playful and chaotic dissolution of divisions between “high” and “low” art forms, while the structural difficulties and necessities of undoing metaphysics from within is reduced to a form of philosophical parody. Derrida’s style becomes self-conscious, self-reflexive, and paradoxical as it fights auto-entrapment, and his work synonymous with the cultural-relativist principle of reducing truth to a form of language game which can only be judged in relation to specific, localised criteria. Relativism, or as Fredric Jameson coins it, “monadic relativism” is discussed specifically in relation to irony in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, and his definition all too clearly encapsulates the postmodern irony to which Derrida is sometimes relegated. Ironic relativism is

¹⁰³ Hutcheon, *Poetics* 94.

¹⁰⁴ Hutcheon, *Poetics* 16.

¹⁰⁵ Against a standard reading of postmodern irony Candace Lang (*Irony/Humor: Critical Paradigms* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1988)) posits an affirmative postmodernism “free of [the] nostalgia for a lost presence” (61) that characterises modernism. She divides irony in two, rendering it *irony* and *humour*, whereby the latter, which equates, she argues, to postmodernism, textuality, deconstruction, *écriture féminine* or simply *écriture*, “implicitly or explicitly casts doubt upon the supposed priority of the signified and, consequently, the priority of the *cogitio* itself” (8). Humorist authors/critics “do not subscribe to the essentially Platonic notion of language as a mere representation of ideas, or of writing as a necessary but potentially dangerous supplement to conceptualisation” (6). The humorist is not concerned with authorial intention – an obsession for the modernist/ironist – but studies the organisation of linguistic elements into a highly mutable system. The ironist’s preoccupation with language’s inadequacy for self-expression is, writes Lang, a false concern for the humorist, since she considers language to form thought and the ego. Assuming that the works of Beckett or Derrida are ironic leads the critic to one of two conclusions:

either (1) there *is* a message darkly concealed under these layers of ironies – a message that usually turns out to be a cry of despair over the human condition, or (2) there isn’t any message, just gratuitous wordplay; hence the work is meaningless and therefore worthless ... (2) is finally the same as (1). (5-6)

While Lang’s humorist has much in common with irony as posited in this thesis, and her criticisms of “irony” are accurate assessments of impoverished conceptualisations thereof, insisting on the disjunction and renaming seems a dangerous exercise, a drive to place irony firmly in a single pole.

the sense that each consciousness is a closed world, so that a representation of the social totality now must take the (impossible) form of a coexistence of those sealed subjective worlds and their peculiar interaction, which is in reality a passage of ships in the night, a centrifugal movement of lines and planes that can never intersect. The literary value that emerges from this new formal practice is called “irony”; and its philosophical ideology often takes the form of a vulgar appropriation of Einstein’s theory of relativity.¹⁰⁶

In this definition postmodern irony is the relativity of discrete units that drift, unconnected, each observing the disorder somewhat differently. The result is a chaotic mess of conflicting, oppositional differences that lack a universal point of agreement. What appears to be differs depending on the point of observation; hence the ironic disjunction between what is expressed and what it potentially means. Postmodern irony for Jameson is thus a weak expression of relativism, and in the case of the theorists discussed in this section – Linda Hutcheon, Ernst Behler and Richard Rorty – the definition unfortunately holds true. In their works irony, postmodernism and deconstruction are conflated into a mode of parodic, historical contextualising through a paradoxical system of relativistic differences, and Derrida crowned first among ironic postmodernists.

Derrida’s texts are seen by Hutcheon as simply postmodernist, which means that they partake of the same indefinite, paradoxical irony outlined above. Derrida’s texts, she writes, “belong solely to neither philosophical nor literary discourse, though they partake of both in a deliberately self-reflexive and contradictory (postmodern) manner”.¹⁰⁷ His texts are “postmodern-contradictory, plural, self-defeating”,¹⁰⁸ as “Poststructuralist discourse paradoxically contests, yet unavoidably inscribes, the very preconceptions it seeks to challenge. ... Along with postmodernist art, such theory is energised by the need to rethink and problematise everything, even its own identity”.¹⁰⁹ In other words, “the paradoxical reliance of deconstruction (like realism, of course) upon a historically determined concept of metaphysics that it wants to deny [... is a] contradiction ... typical of postmodern theory”.¹¹⁰ Derrida’s texts are thus reduced to Hutcheon’s concept of an “ironic”, postmodern engagement with history. As she puts it: “the

¹⁰⁶ Fredric Jameson *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991) 412.

¹⁰⁷ Hutcheon, *Poetics* 12.

¹⁰⁸ Hutcheon, *Poetics* 54.

¹⁰⁹ Hutcheon, *Poetics* 55.

¹¹⁰ Hutcheon, *Poetics* 59.

Derridean strategy of writing *sous rature* ... makes you want to have your historical referent and erase it too”.¹¹¹ Derrida’s texts are postmodernly self-conscious¹¹² and his work on the trace simply a renaming of postmodern metafiction: postmodern novels are “metafiction[s which ...] incarnate the Derridean network of traces in their own self-reflexive textuality.”¹¹³ Importantly, while Hutcheon’s later work *Irony’s Edge* offers a slightly more sophisticated analysis of irony, in this text Derrida barely receives a mention, as Hutcheon’s reading of Derrida is grounded in self-reflexive, parodic historicity, and she seems unable to reinscribe Derrida into a theory of irony based on political power. She thereby succumbs to the all too frequent mistake of deeming Derrida’s texts devoid of political engagement, a mistake that Rorty enthusiastically duplicates.

While Ernst Behler’s *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity* presents a reading of irony, ironic writers and postmodernism that exceeds Hutcheon’s in subtlety and philosophical engagement, he nonetheless also succumbs to the trap of reducing the irony in Derrida’s work to a form of loose postmodernism. Despite seeing Derrida’s critique of reason as a “genuine philosophical task”,¹¹⁴ and despite – or perhaps because of – understanding deconstruction as the performance of Schlegel’s system/nonsystem, deconstruction becomes an asystematic style that transgresses genre divisions and espouses parodic techniques of undermining (metaphysics) from within. The similarities between German Romanticism and Postmodernism are numerous, and Behler vastly reduces the structural subtleties of Derrida’s texts by reading Derrida as a conflation of the two.

Like Hutcheon, Behler understands postmodernism as a retrospectively orientated “critical continuation of modernism which is itself both critique and criticism”.¹¹⁵ Postmodernism lacks the positive qualities that an era requires, and as such is a not-quite period, no more than the critique of a critique, a relation to the past of “self-criticism and self-doubt”.¹¹⁶ Postmodernism makes a movement towards the past a gesture of self-reflexive self-involvement that rejects global truths, all-encompassing systems of meaning and general, assessable foundations

¹¹¹ Hutcheon, *Poetics* 145.

¹¹² Hutcheon, *Poetics* 13.

¹¹³ Hutcheon, *Poetics* 81.

¹¹⁴ Behler 30.

¹¹⁵ Behler 5.

¹¹⁶ Behler 5.

of knowledge. It is “an ironic notion communicating indirectly, by way of circumlocution, configuration, and bafflement, the necessity and impossibility of discussing the status of modernity in a straightforward and meaningful manner”.¹¹⁷ For Behler irony and postmodernity are virtually indistinguishable: irony is a parodic, sceptical engagement with the past and a self-reflexive, self-critical mode of writing and being: “the ironic discourse itself, because of its highly self-reflexive character, practices critical, deprecating observations of a self-referential nature as a constantly recurring technique”.¹¹⁸

Like Hutcheon, Behler believes that the “double-edged”¹¹⁹ nature of postmodern, ironic discourse means that it cannot even be reappropriated as a (non)system for those outside the system – women, postcolonial identities, queer theories, etc – it works against those who attempt to use its openness. Behler’s irony is, however, somewhat more refined than general theories, in that it is not a form of communication in which the speaker “says one thing and means another” but communication that undoes communication, a discourse that says something and at the same time undoes the content, logic, structure and stability of what it says. While both Hutcheon’s and Behler’s formulations of irony can be described as the meaning of *the space between*, for Hutcheon this is the space between possible meanings. For Behler, grounded in Schlegelian irony, irony is the movement of and the space between self-creation and self-destruction, a saying that destroys itself as it posits itself. In the oscillation between production and annihilation irony transgresses genre divisions and the limits of language:

The ironic manner of expression can be described as attempting to transcend the restrictions of normal discourse and straightforward speech by making the ineffable articulate, at least indirectly, through a great number of verbal strategies, and accomplishing what lies beyond the reach of direct communication.¹²⁰

The writer who best performs postmodern irony, a self-reflexive, double-edged, performative style and content is, according to Behler, *Derrida*. Derrida’s “paradoxical”, “contradictory” approach espouses a “type of irony ... best conveyed in action, through performance, a kind of writing which in the mood of

¹¹⁷ Behler 4-5.

¹¹⁸ Behler 112.

¹¹⁹ Behler 32.

¹²⁰ Behler 111.

a joyful wisdom employs the logic of play and the rules of a game. This is best accomplished in the writings of Jacques Derrida”.¹²¹

Discussing Derrida’s “Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy” as an ironic text,¹²² Behler writes that Derrida

mimes Kant’s text, but he also parodies it and thereby transforms, deforms it. ... On the one hand, he seems to assume the attitude of one who warns us in the name of rational enlightenment against the death of all true philosophy, but on the other, he casts grave doubts on the credibility of such an endeavour.¹²³

Derrida’s “discontinuous, fragmentary, and ironic mode of writing”¹²⁴ has the parodic element of postmodern irony; the use of a past style or historical stance against itself. It is self-creating and self-defeating as it warns while ironically problematising that warning, showing it to undo itself. The undecidable “come” repeated in Derrida’s text is read as a movement of language outside itself that Behler understands as postmodern: “It is precisely here, at the breaching of the limits of communication, that postmodern thinking and writing begin to operate through circumlocution, indirectness, configuration, and ironic communication”.¹²⁵

For Behler “*différance*” exhibits a structure “similar to that of universal irony”.¹²⁶ Universal irony, a term taken from Hegel but also used by Kierkegaard, is a dialectical movement whereby each historical period displaces the last, and carries within it the seeds of its own displacement. Universal irony is therefore the global, tragic irony of progressive, sequential undoing, and doubly ironic in that the irony comes from “the eye, the observation, the consciousness of the one who views this destruction as a necessary concomitant and precondition of world historical development and of life in general”.¹²⁷ For Behler it is the fact that *différance* posits difference functioning from within, as the actual structure of the mark, which makes it like the principle of negativity in Hegel’s dialectics, or a universal or Schlegelian irony. The differing and deferring of *différance*

¹²¹ Behler 103-04.

¹²² Behler 31.

¹²³ Behler 34-35.

¹²⁴ Behler 112.

¹²⁵ Behler 36.

¹²⁶ Behler 104.

¹²⁷ Behler 90.

transgresses metaphysics, and moves language to an impossible zone where it attempts to articulate notions other than those grounded in presence and identity. According to Behler this “appears to be the most stringent example of the ‘impossibility and necessity of complete communication’ which Schlegel listed among the characteristics of irony”.¹²⁸ Derrida’s undermining of metaphysics from within is seen by Behler as ironic, in that it is a self-critical, self-reflexive creating and undoing, a parody. Hence, while Behler’s account of irony and the irony of Derrida’s texts focuses on the limits of communication and self-positing/self-undoing, the structural irony of the mark is reduced to a form of parody, a critical use of a structure from within the structure. Derrida’s critique or destabilising of metaphysics becomes a postmodern, reflexive, parodic pushing of limits from within, and *différance* an oscillation between meanings that undo themselves.

Richard Rorty’s *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* presents an irony that is postmodern in its jaded, parodic attitude to the past and sense of the power of redescription, while simultaneously subscribing to an old-fashioned picture of irony as an intellectual exercise for the disillusioned and degenerate rich. Rorty’s private, self-involved ironist is lost in the contingency of her beliefs and adrift in the “final vocabulary” that she never truly possesses, a phrase Rorty uses to describe the vocabulary, somewhat idiosyncratic, somewhat of a specific time and place, which controls or (de)limits a subject’s communication. An ironist for Rorty is someone who doubts her own final vocabulary while realising that she cannot use it to adequately express those doubts, nor sufficiently substantiate or dissolve them. She also opines that her vocabulary is not in touch with the “real” but is just a system of differences. An ironist is someone who realises that what is considered the essence of something can be changed by a redefinition, and as such she is never able to take herself seriously, recognising that her own construction is shifting and transient. Tellingly, Rorty opposes irony to “common sense”,¹²⁹ a state in which the subject doesn’t question her final vocabulary as she knows it is wholly sufficient for description and communication. For Rorty, a metaphysician subscribes to common sense, while an ironist is a nominalist and a historicist who thinks that nothing has an intrinsic essence.

¹²⁸ Behler 109.

¹²⁹ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 74.

Rorty's ironist is essentially a morally dubious literary theorist who adds lurking political bankruptcy to literary studies. Ironists and ironist theorists – like Derrida – are “invaluable in our attempt to form a private self-image, but pretty much useless when it comes to politics”.¹³⁰ Irony instils a necessary tendency for questioning and self-doubt while demanding freedom and openness, but this is only suitable for the private intellectual, as Rorty suspects that ironist notions weaken and dissolve liberal societies.

I cannot imagine a culture which socialised its youth in such a way as to make them continually dubious about their own process of socialisation. Irony seems inherently a private matter. ... Irony is, if not intrinsically resentful, at least reactive. Ironists have to have something to have doubts about, something from which to be alienated.¹³¹

Liberal societies are bound together by common vocabularies and common hopes; if individuals see themselves as comprising no more than vocabularies, then human nature and solidarity breaks down. “A universalistic ethics seems incompatible with ironism, simply because it is hard to imagine stating such an ethics without some doctrine about the nature of man. Such an appeal to real essence is the antithesis of ironism”.¹³² Irony is a wholly private affair,¹³³ contrasted by Rorty with public, liberal hope, and the ironic position is one which employs a personally involved, socially distanced, “ironic theoretical metalanguage which makes no sense to the man in the street”.¹³⁴ Rorty's ironist is one who can spend her time in abstract contemplation, as the concerns of the poor, the malnourished and the workers are not hers. Irony does not even have the salvation of having once benefited humanity; for all the wrongs done by Marxism, Christianity, or utilitarianism, Rorty argues, “there was a time when each served human liberty. It is not obvious that ironism ever has”.¹³⁵

Ironists are cruel but clever bullies, who make the world and its contents (seem) futile, obsolete, and powerless by telling people that their final vocabulary is contingent and open to parody. The critics of deconstruction – “one of the

¹³⁰ Rorty 83.

¹³¹ Rorty 87-88.

¹³² Rorty 88.

¹³³ One might point out that the iterability of language means that its privacy is always contaminated by the public and the social. Language can never be as wholly and finally egocentric as Rorty deems it.

¹³⁴ Rorty 88.

¹³⁵ Rorty 89.

ironists' current catchwords"¹³⁶ – who see Derrida's style as devious and morally corrupt in its opacity have a defensible argument: "there is something right about the suspicion which ironism arouses. Ironism, as I have defined it, results from awareness of the power of redescription".¹³⁷ Derrida, as private ironist extraordinaire, is sensitive to vocabularies, aware of their contingency and socio-cultural historical grounding, careful to avoid entrapment in a single vocabulary, and capable of powerful yet opaque redescriptions. In his earlier "more professorial period" Derrida tries "to find words which get us 'beyond' metaphysics",¹³⁸ while in his later "more eccentric, personal, and original" period he turned "such systematic projects of undercutting [metaphysics] into private jokes".¹³⁹ Rorty's later Derrida privatises his philosophy, and

simply drops theory – the attempt to see his predecessors steadily and whole – in favour of fantasising about those predecessors, playing with them, giving free rein to the trains of association they produce. There is no moral to these fantasies, nor any public (pedagogic or political) use to be made of them.¹⁴⁰

Derrida's texts like *Glas* and "Envois" are exemplary of nothing more substantial than fantasy, which Rorty deems the end product of ironist theorising. Derrida is said to make no attempt to unite the public and the private, but devotes himself to the "reduction of public to private productions, of books to babies, writing to sex, thinking to love".¹⁴¹ Fearful of being trapped in someone's final vocabulary, Rorty's Derrida uses playful, uncategorisable language in a way that reduces the importance of his quasi-transcendentals to a form of defamiliarising defence against habitualisation. This Derrida is a caricature of Schlegel, wilfully writing lurid, postcard versions of *Lucinde* in his bedroom, at night and under the covers. Rorty dismisses these postcards as private idiosyncrasies, which they are, but he completely misses the public dimension to the postcard, how it is open and visible to all, dismissed as innocuous and yet wholly subverting the logocentric system of the letter. For Rorty Derrida's "Envois" falls under Hutcheon's category

¹³⁶ Rorty 89.

¹³⁷ Rorty 89.

¹³⁸ Rorty 123.

¹³⁹ Rorty 125. Rorty wrote this book in 1989, so what he calls Derrida's later period is from *Glas* to *Signsponge*, i.e., from the 1970s to 1989.

¹⁴⁰ Rorty 125.

¹⁴¹ Rorty 130.

of historiographic metafiction; a clever, chaotic undermining of conventions written for private pleasure. While his ironist may be close to Demosthenes' shirker of public duty, his refusal to see the political engagement of both Derrida and irony blinds him to their ethically engaged qualities.

It should be clear to any reader of Derrida that his work does not fall under the descriptions of postmodernism presented here. While the thesis as a whole operates to present a more satisfactory reading of irony, it is worthwhile to briefly present Derrida's answer to notions of relativism and Rorty's false distinction between public and private. In an interview Derrida lists the "countless misunderstandings and ... host of prejudices as tenacious as they are crudely polemical" (N 366) that deconstruction has undergone: "deconstruction as 'relativist,' 'sceptical,' 'nihilist,' 'irrationalist,' 'the enemy of the Enlightenment,' 'the prisoner of verbal language and rhetoric,' 'ignorant of the difference between logic and rhetoric, philosophy and literature,' etc" (N 366). While not all of these misreading are simply due to associations made between Derrida and postmodernism, many of them can be found in the works of theorists presented above, and are linked to the approximating of his work to a vague version of postmodernism. The use of the word "negotiation" provides a useful example of the way in which Derrida's work has certain similarities with postmodernism and German Romanticism, but surpasses them in philosophical and structural subtlety and general purpose.

Derrida describes a negotiation as a movement between "two incompatible imperatives that appear to be incompatible but are equally imperative" (N 13). A negotiation is impure; it requires involvement, and compromise. Etymologically its "un-leisure" implies fatigue, movement and the impossibility of stopping, which for Derrida means "no thesis, no position, no theme, no station, no substance, no stability, a perpetual suspension, a suspension without rest" (N 13). For Derrida "negotiation is a to-and-fro between impatience and patience" (N 29) that is not simply an oscillation, an infinite, paradoxical play between opposites, but a structural contamination that reveals the contamination of opposites. Patience and impatience do and do not contradict each other in a way that is not indicative of a postmodern (or indeed German Romantic) paradoxical chaos, but of a structural contamination that operates according to its own, transgressed, laws.

Because there is no general rule or law for negotiation, just the need to immediately respond to the context, it “must be adjusted to each case, to each moment without, however, the conclusion being a relativism or empiricism” (N 17). As Derrida writes elsewhere:

In spite of appearances, and the hasty philosophers who often rush to them, nothing is less empiricist or relativist than a certain attention to the multiplicity of contexts and discursive strategies that they govern: a certain insistence on the fact that a context is always open and cannot be saturated; a taking into account of the “perhaps” and the “quasi” in a thinking of the event. (N 363)

Taking account of differences and particulars is neither fatalistic, empiricist nor relativistic. It acknowledges differences, retains them, stresses singularity, without making them “equal” and therefore abandoning them to the sea of the same described by Jameson. Derrida’s work is precisely not relativistic; relativism undoes difference, while Derrida works to allow alterity to remain. As Derrida asks, “Is it empiricist or relativist to seriously take into account what arrives – differences of every order, beginning with the difference of contexts?” (N 367)

A negotiation is a compromise, and it is compromising. It is an ethical movement, a constant, restless stepping up to the other. Thus

Negotiation is constantly in a state of micro-transformation. *Every day*: this means it does not stop. This also means that, between politics – that is, public life – and private life (interests, desires, etc.), the communication is never broken. I do not believe in the conceptual value of a rigorous distinction between the private and the public. There can be the singular and the secret, but these resist the “private” as much as they do the “public”. (N 17-18)

Derrida’s work is a negotiation, an ethical movement that is not a thetic, methodical approach but a permanent, (im)patient step towards alterity. It makes no rigorous distinctions between the spheres of the public and the private but engages with the mutually contaminated states of both. While it absolutely makes room for differences, and treats each difference as an individual singularity, it never succumbs to the denial of difference that is relativism. Its movement of *différance* is not simply constrained oscillation, but a term that expresses the structural intricacies of a temporal disjunction within the mark. It is these complexities that give rise to a wholly different form of irony.

Structures of Irony: Parabasis, Parataxis and Anacoluthon

Introduction

This chapter argues that the structural functioning of irony is best exemplified by the step/not of parabasis, the conjunctive and disjunctive spaces of parataxis, and the interruption of the anacoluthon. Irony is that which steps between supposedly closed categories, crossing and mixing codes, singularly and mechanically producing, describing and undoing. It is a force and a weakness, the structure of the divided mark that promises and commits perjury, anacoluthically interrupting the subject. It is the contaminated perperformative, a productive force/weakness which exceeds propositional exegesis, overstepping boundaries between literature and philosophy. It is an excess, the insertion of a gap or the *beyond* into the mark itself, which splits and doubles, performing and describing what it performs. Hence the performativity in the texts that interest Derrida partake of a “performativity in crisis” (SI 42), catachrestic malapropisms that in their skewed, improper use of reflexivity and the productive power of the iterable mark fabricate an excess beyond traditional uses of the constative or the performative.

It is de Man, rather than Derrida, who is most often thought to combine irony and deconstruction. In his eulogy for de Man Derrida describes him as “irony itself”, and one who – here we see again caution in Derrida’s use of the term “irony” – “never gave in to that negative assurance with which the ironic consciousness is sometimes too easily satisfied” (MF xvi-xvii). De Man’s two major texts on irony – “The Rhetoric of Temporality” (1971) and “The Concept of Irony” (1976/77) – see a pronounced change in his approach to irony; the latter, writes de Man, was written as an “*autocritique*” (AI 170) of the first. This chapter argues that while Derrida appears not to have read “The Concept of Irony” while writing *Memoires for Paul de Man*,¹ not only does he prefigure de Man’s eventual, corrected definition of irony, but surpasses it in subtlety and complexity.

¹ The text that is published in *Aesthetic Ideology* under the title “The Concept of Irony” is taken from the notes de Man compiled for lectures given in Yale in 1976-77. However, *Aesthetic Ideology* was not published until 1996, while *Memoires for Paul de Man* was first published in 1986, and so Derrida could not have read the text as published. It is of course possible, given Derrida and de Man’s friendship, that elements of de Man’s lectures were discussed, but as Derrida neither mentions them nor de Man’s repudiation of much of the irony posited in “The Rhetoric of Temporality”, it seems unlikely that he was aware of them.

To step towards a theory of pervasive, structural irony it is necessary to step with and through de Man's text machine to Derrida's impossible event. Thus, while this chapter plays paratactic irony against Marian Hobson's syntactic irony, and brings parabasis a step closer to Blanchot's step/not of *pas*, the underlying engagement lies with de Man.

Irony and de Man

In "The Rhetoric of Temporality" de Man conceptualises allegory and irony as the distinct yet inseparable components of a temporal exigency, indicative of language's remove from the empirical, and resultant in a divided subject. Baudelaire, de Man explains, referred to irony as "*le comique absolu*", whereby the self is doubled between an empirical self immersed in the world, and a self as linguistic structure that observes the empirical self. The reflexive process – watching, for example, the empirical self fall and reflecting on the fall – does not just occur through language, but transfers the empirical self into a world of language, whereby language is both an object in the world and the means through which the world is understood. As de Man writes, "Language thus conceived divides the subject into an empirical self, immersed in the world, and a self that becomes like a sign in its attempt at differentiation and self-definition" (BI 213). The ironic, doubled self thus contains "an empirical self that exists in a state of inauthenticity and a self that exists only in the form of a language that asserts the knowledge of this inauthenticity" (BI 214).

While one must laugh at the fall, this process is by no means a comforting process; for Baudelaire it was a process of unravelling that reveals a being on the verge of madness. As de Man writes:

absolute irony is a consciousness of madness, itself the end of all consciousness; it is a consciousness of a non-consciousness, a reflection on madness from the inside of madness itself. But this reflection is made possible only by the double structure of ironic language: the ironist invents a form of himself that is "mad" but that does not know its own madness; he then proceeds to reflect on his madness objectified. (BI 216)

The ironic, reflexive self must think to the very borders of what can be thought, and reflect on madness, on the limits of what the linguistic self can express. Formed through language, the reflective self is a fiction that cannot be confused

with the “real” empirical self, and should not see itself as a stable point of knowledge and order. Should the ironic self see itself as a ground then it becomes empirical, and reality and fiction become confused. The ironic relation of the ironic self to itself – irony to the second power or Schlegel’s irony of irony – stems, according to de Man, from the continued separation of fact and fiction. De Man sees parabasis as “what is called in English criticism the ‘self-conscious narrator,’ the author’s intrusion that disrupts the fictional illusion” (BI 218-19). This disruption does not serve to produce a greater realism, but a heightened self of fictionality that reveals that the ironic, fictional self can never be a “real”, empirical self.

For de Man irony is an endless process that never leads to synthesis, as “irony engenders a temporal sequence of acts of consciousness which is endless” (BI 220). Irony does not move towards unity, but instead is the endlessly repetitive “recurrence of a self-escalating act of consciousness” (BI 220). It is an infinite movement of lucid madness: a consciousness of non-consciousness. It has no origin and relates to what it means or refers to – the empirical self/object – only in terms of difference: “Irony divides the flow of temporal experience into a past that is pure mystification and a future that remains harassed forever by a relapse within the [inescapable] inauthentic” (BI 222). De Man’s ironist is very much trapped by her own irony; all she can do is “restate and repeat it on an increasingly conscious level, but [she] remains endlessly caught in the impossibility of making this knowledge applicable to the empirical world” (BI 222). Irony and the ironic self drift from empirical reality, moving further and further from the sign they designate.

While the symbol operates through synecdoche or metonymy, allegory, the second component of the temporal exigency, is always of a different time and space to what it represents. Like a metaphor it refers to another sign which precedes it, a sign with which it can never coincide. Like irony, allegory is removed from its origin, temporally adrift. Unlike irony it operates diachronically; the structure of allegory is found “in the tendency of the language toward narrative, the spreading out along the axis of imaginary time in order to give duration to what is, in fact, simultaneous within the subject” (BI 225). While allegory gives the appearance of development and progress over time, existing “within an ideal time that is never here and now but always a past or an endless

future” (BI 226), “irony appears as an instantaneous process that takes place rapidly, suddenly, in one single movement” (BI 225). There is a climax or point, “the instant at which the two selves, the empirical as well as the ironic, are simultaneously present, juxtaposed within the same moment but as two irreconcilable and disjointed beings” (BI 226). The difference resides in the subject and time is reduced to a single moment. “Essentially the mode of the present, it [irony] knows neither memory nor prefigurative duration. ... Irony is a synchronic structure” (BI 226).

In “The Concept of Irony” de Man argues that irony functions at the level of the signifier and interrupts all that is posited by language. Irony is no longer a trope, but the *trope of tropes*, as the turn contained in irony is a shaper turn, a “more radical negation” (AI 165) than that contained in metaphor, synecdoche or metonymy. What is at stake in irony, he claims, “is the possibility of understanding, the possibility of reading, the very readability of texts, the possibility of deciding on *a* meaning or on a multiple set of meanings or on a controlled polysemy of meanings” (AI 167). Irony is therefore not simply a turn within language from direct or literal meaning that nonetheless presupposes its existence, but a double turn that moves away from any presumption of a knowable single meaning or “authentic” language.

De Man proposes that the very foundation of the self is based on a tropological system of catachrestic turns. For Fichte, de Man argues, the self is a property of language, as the self simultaneously posits itself, and the/its nonself, through language. It is only because the self and the opposite of the self are concurrently posited that the properties of the self can be discussed; when the poles interact they delimit each other and enable comparisons and judgements to be made. Hence the (de)limiting and defining that Schlegel speaks of in relation to the self: *Selbstbeschränkung*. This structure, the isolation and circulation of properties, “the way in which properties can be exchanged between entities when they are being compared with each other in an act of judgement” (AI 174), is likened by de Man to the structure of tropes, and Fichte’s system is therefore a theory of tropes:

the circulation of the property (*Merkmal*) described in the act of judgement here is structured like a metaphor or a trope, is based on the substitution of properties. It’s structured like a synecdoche, a relationship between part

and whole, or structured like a metaphor, a substitution on the basis of resemblance and of differentiation between two entities. (AI 176)

For de Man Fichte's theory is a *negative* allegorical narrative of the self and knowledge, as the self can never know what it is, can never be positively identified, and all judgements about the self are reflexive and therefore unstable. This system is a system of tropes, a tropological system "to which the corresponding experience is that of the self standing above its own experiences" (AI 177). Hence, de Man argues, Schlegel's detached subject; the lofty urbanity of the ironist is the Fichtean self's radical detachment, although as we will address in chapter four, de Man specifically and inaccurately relates this distance to the writer's own work.

De Man understands the "transcendental buffoonery" of Schlegel's *Lyceum* fragment 42 to refer to the buffo of the *commedia dell'arte*, "the disruption of narrative illusion, the *aparté*, the aside to the audience, by means of which the illusion of the fiction is broken (what we call in German *aus der Rolle fallen*, to drop out of your role)" (AI 178). The technical term for this is, according to de Man, *parabasis*: "the interruption of a discourse by a shift in the rhetorical register" (AI 178), also known as *anacoluthon*. The latter refers more commonly to syntactical patterns of tropes, and is used to designate an interruption in the syntactical expectations of a phrase or sentence.² But Schlegel's famous definition of irony likens it to a *permanent* parabasis, and so the interruption must place repeatedly, paradoxically disrupting the narrative line at all times. Since the narrative is the very structure of the tropological system, this enables de Man to give a definition of irony as "the permanent parabasis of the allegory of tropes" (AI 179). Thus the coherence of representational narrative forms is permanently interrupted, and it is irony which makes it impossible to achieve a consistent theory of narrative. As the allegory of tropes is (also) Fichte's system of the ego and of knowledge, then irony, as de Man understands it, is the *anacoluthic interruption of "reality"*, the calling attention to the fiction of a stable, solid world and self. Irony is that which causes dialectical and reflexive systems to interrupt themselves. That language can (catachrestically) posit at all is because of irony, but irony will also fundamentally disrupt this very positing.

² For example: "I will have such revenges on you both,
That all the world shall – I will do such things,
What they are, yet I know not." William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, II. iv.

De Man proposes that the shocked reception that Schlegel's novel *Lucinde* received was due to its bipartite structure – what is ostensibly a philosophical discourse is also a reflection on sex. Thus two different codes inhabit the same space, and parabolically interrupt “each other in such a fundamental way that this very possibility of disruption represents a threat to all assumptions about what a text should be” (AI 169). It is the “free play” of irony which makes a treatise on philosophical matters a lurid description of sex. As the now famous passage on the ironic text machine reads:

There is a machine out there, a text machine, an implacable determination and a total arbitrariness, *unbedingter Willkür*, he says, (Lyceum Fragment 42), which inhabits words on the level of the signifier, which undoes any narrative consistency of lines, and which undoes the reflexive and the dialectical model, both of which are, as you know, the basis of any narration. There is no narration without reflection, no narrative without dialectic, and what irony disrupts (according to Friedrich Schlegel) is precisely that dialectic and that reflexivity, the tropes. The reflexive and the dialectical are the tropological system, the Fichtean system, and that is what irony undoes. (AI 181)³

Irony disrupts while enabling reflexivity, and is the catachrestic movement, the turn that missteps, that undoes narrative while enabling meaning to be.

Despite his repudiation of irony as formulated in “The Rhetoric of Temporality”, there are certain consistencies and similarities between de Man's two essays. While the definition of parabasis in “The Rhetoric of Temporality” unsatisfactorily understands it as the intrusion of the author into her work, this is not historically inaccurate. The error that de Man makes is ignoring the fact that this intrusion was scripted and as such as much a part of the play as the action proper. Although parabasis is presented in the second essay more convincingly as a shift in syntax, style and form, the concept of the disruption of artistic illusion is not abandoned but transferred to the figure of the transcendental buffoon. De Man thereby continues to retain the notion of the demonstration of the fiction and unreality of the play, which is, as the fourth chapter will show, a misreading of Schlegel's reality/fiction dichotomy. The emphasis on tropes remains in “The Concept of Irony”, although it is refined: in the later essay irony is no longer

³ In *Stupidity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002) Avital Ronell relates the impossibility of reading that stems from the text machine to stupidity, and the inevitability of always remaining a slow and witless reader (97-161).

simply a trope, but a trope of tropes or trope to the second power, turning away from the dependence on a “natural” language of literal meaning. The ironic subject in both is a fictive, tropological subject formed through language, and irony as self-reflexive consciousness in the first becomes the very (im)possibility of reflexivity, reading and understanding in the second. Irony for de Man is the trope of tropes through which the self is self-positing and self-destroying, that which causes dialectical and reflexive systems to interrupt themselves, the force through which the text machine operates to undo narrative flow, duration and consistency. Irony, as de Man’s definition posits it, is “the permanent parabasis of the allegory of tropes”.

Derrida and de Man

In *Memoires for Paul de Man* Derrida remembers de Man’s work and his friendship through a study of memory, specifically linked to the dual movements of irony and allegory. Irony and allegory, as Derrida reads them through “The Rhetoric of Temporality”, are figures of diremption, repetition and replication, whereby the empirical self is replaced or split by the ironic, autobiographical, linguistic self. Together the diachronic narrative of allegory and the synchronic moment of irony form “the rhetoric of memory which recalls, recounts, forgets, recounts and recalls forgetting, referring to the past only to efface what is essential to it: anteriority” (MF 81-82). In summarising the conjunction and disjunction – what will be referred to as ironic hyphenation – between irony and allegory in de Man’s essay, Derrida explains that

Paul de Man is bent on demonstrating “the implicit and rather enigmatic link” (p. 208) for allegory and irony; we have already glimpsed it for synecdoche, prosopopeia, or parabasis. Irony too is a figure of disjunction, duplication, and doubling (pp. 212, 217, etc.). It often produces a disjunction by which “a purely linguistic subject replaces the original self” (p. 217), according to the scheme of amnesic memory of which we have spoken. And yet, precisely because of the disjunctive structure that they share, allegory and irony draw up between them this singular contract, and each recalls the other. Of course, the former is essentially narrative, the latter momentary and pointed (*instantanéiste*), but together they form, in fact, the rhetoric of memory. (MF 81-82)

The “scheme of amnesic memory” is memory understood as comprising the contaminated terms *Erinnerung* – “good-living-memory” (MF 67) – and

Gedächtnis – memory which remembers through the *tekhnē* of language and the sign, and which therefore leads to forgetting. Memory is thereby composed of what Derrida calls the allegorical *Mnemosyne* (memory) and the ironic *Lēthē* (forgetting) (MF 84). Derrida argues that not only does one remember events that occurred *and* events that did not, but that the remembered event is always a double structure of occurrence and non-occurrence, as what is remembered is the *linguistic form* of the event, which is not the event which occurred. Thus memory is an amnesic memory which comprises the narrative memory of allegory with bursts of ironic forgetfulness. Memory is both the retention and effacement of the past, and as such, like irony and allegory, lacks anteriority: there is only memory without the past (event). In remembering the empirical event is replaced by a linguistic event, and the self that remembers is a linguistic, tropological, fictional self. Hence memory as irony/allegory replaces the “original” self with the linguistic subject.

A novel of novels, an allegory of irony, is, according to de Man, a narrative that prefigures itself, that is tied to a fictive past and future – allegorical duration – and yet contains within itself characters or moments which are isolated, whose past and future events do not exist for them – ironic moments. However, Derrida (ironically) interrupts de Man’s text by stressing the contamination of irony and allegory:

Is not *that* [the moving towards a memory which prefigures the ironic/allegoric split] his [de Man’s] practice, his style, his signature, the stamp of his deconstruction? I speak of the signature because this entire series of questions thrusts itself upon me at the moment where there appears a kind of hybrid of two memories or of a memory and an amnesia which divide the same act. As if the ironic moment were signed, were sealed in the body of an allegorical writing. (MF 84)

Irony and allegory operate in a non-dialectical contamination or hybridity, so that the (ironic) moment of the signature is always found within the (allegorical) duration of the narrative or autobiography. The body of de Man’s texts – his allegorical autobiography – comprises ironic moments of signing, where life is figured and disfigured. In *Memoires* Derrida refers to the act of turning a text on an other into a text on the self as the *irony of the signature*. Thus, as we will see, Derrida moves towards a reading of irony as the interruption of genre or code that

takes place in a text that changes it from a thetic exposition to a personal account: anacoluthic – or parabolic – irony. As he writes:

where de Man says of Baudelaire that he says of Guys what in truth he says of himself, how can one avoid reading in this passage something Paul de Man is having said by these two others about himself, for himself, in his name, through the effects of an irony of the signature? Irony or allegory of the trademark (stamp *estampille*), perhaps? (MF 62-63)

Irony and allegory are the interruption of codes, a spectral haunting of the text by its possible interpretations. Texts become phantom-texts, haunted by ghostly turns and signatures, by “the phantoms of all the prosopopeias or parabases which, in de Man’s later writing, have been brought in simply to take up the idea of allegory, even irony” (MF 80).

Derrida asks if we should “disjoin this ghostly disjunction called allegory from that other ghostly disjunction called irony” (MF 81); his answer is unclear. While Derrida directly voices de Man’s opinion on the immiscibility of irony and allegory – “two figures that Paul de Man judges at once inseparable and irreducible” (MF 23) – he also deliberately confuses and combines them. There is a point of undecidability, he writes, in which you cannot and must not dwell, and this is the point of the mutual interruption of irony and allegory. However, insofar as a concentration or emphasis can imply hierarchy or privileging, Derrida seems, like de Man, to afford allegory a position of primacy, although, unlike de Man, through a deliberate contamination of the two. That which is ironic is also allegorical – in the above quotation the stamp is both ironic and allegorical – while at times when the term irony is expected allegory is (anacoluthically) used: on explaining how memory comprises two tropes, Derrida doubles the term “allegory”: “the one [which] pretends to know how to tell stories – this is diachronic *allegory* – and the other [which] feigns amnesia – this is synchronic *allegory*” (my emphasis) (MF 82). A little earlier Derrida states that “It is the power of allegory, and its ironic force as well, to say something quite different from and even contrary to what seems to be intended through it” (MF 74). Irony thus becomes a force within the allegorical.

Based, perhaps, on de Man’s foregrounding of allegory over the course of his career, and reading from “The Rhetoric of Temporality”, Derrida understands allegory as a trope whose narrative structure plays out the tale of the tropes, and is

therefore a trope to the second power, the allegory of allegory: “since the concept of allegory (as a metonymy) means something other than what it says through a figure about the system, it constitutes a kind of allegorical trope in the most general sense of the term” (MF 74). The allegory of allegory, the allegory of tropes, is the allegory, or disjunction, of a disjunction, and “will always remain a disjoined reflexivity, an allegory of allegory that can never, in its specular self-reflection, rejoin itself, fit itself to itself. Its memory will promise but never provide a chance for re-collecting itself” (MF 76).⁴ Derrida has therefore prefigured de Man’s later essay while also anacoluthically interrupting it: for de Man the trope of tropes, the interruptive, extra turn is irony, here Derrida names the same interruptive, disjunctive force allegory. Even more importantly, Derrida describes allegory as the allegory of tropes, the phrase de Man used in his definition of irony: *irony is the permanent parabasis of the allegory of tropes*. The allegory of tropes is the diachronic narrative of tropological turns, the disjunctive turning (around, away from) of the system of disjunctive turns. In *Memoires for Paul de Man* life is the (allegorical) narrative of (tropological) turning, where the past becomes a work of narrative fiction, a memory that is other to the event it has remembered/fictionalised. De Man’s “allegory of tropes” also describes fictionalised life and knowledge, and so, without Fichte or de Man’s second essay, Derrida has arrived at de Man’s definition, anacoluthically naming the same structure or force “allegory”. Derrida’s essay performs the permanent parabasis, performs the anacoluthic interruption of the definition in its conflation and deliberate confusion of irony and allegory. In *Memoires for Paul de Man* we see *performed* the “permanent parabasis of the allegory of tropes”, performed ironically or catachrestically, with the necessary parabolic turn or transgressive step. The deliberate confusion of irony and allegory, the temporal disorder between the instant and duration, the complication and contamination between memory and amnesia, is both faithful to de Man’s essay *and* an interruption of its codes. Derrida thus makes the point of undecidability between poles even more effectively undecidable, and performs on de Man’s text what he performs on

⁴ In the final lecture of the series – “Acts” – Derrida speaks of memory and performativity. To speak of memory is also to speak of the future, to speak of what is to come – we remember to protect, to move towards, to anticipate the future. To speak of memory is therefore to speak of the promise, and of the performative. A promise is always excessive, it always promises too much and is haunted by the possibility of its own failure, but without this excess it would be a simple description of the future, and therefore a constative. Hence the excess undoes the performative as promise and is the possibility of its failure, while also being the very structure that enables it to be.

Levinas's in "At This Very Moment". A text on irony demands interruption, and so Derrida anacoluthically disrupts de Man's in a way that turns the text in a different direction and produces an excess.

Derrida plays with the contamination of the terms throughout his essay, deliberately confusing and replacing them, setting up narrative expectations that are anacoluthically undone by ironic substitutions. The opposition between irony and allegory is never stable as the opposition between memory and forgetfulness is never secure – allegory is memory, but memory itself contains or is a form of forgetfulness. Irony is forgetfulness, but associated with writing, which is a form of memory, it is also a mode of retention. Irony, of the moment, still promises, which is of the future, and is thus a performative which writes for the future. The association of irony with writing is important – irony is a force of inscription, and while of the moment, lacking narrative duration, it outlasts, it remains, potentially inhabiting every new context. Allegory's memory is the memory of anamnesis, living memory, which is often associated with orality. Orality has the duration of cultural memory, epic narratives told and retold. Which last, but without the (supposed) durability of the immediacy of irony. What becomes "clear" is that Derrida's essay (irony) is the anacoluthic interruption (permanent parabasis) of memory, life, representation, allegory (allegory of tropes).

Not only does Derrida anticipate de Man's definition of irony, he also presages a subtler reading of parabasis and of the self-reflexive qualities of irony. Derrida refers to "parabasis" twice in *Memoires for Paul de Man*, each time associating it with prosopopeia. As discussed further in chapter six, for de Man prosopopeia denotes the spectral presence of the author within her own work, and so the juxtaposition of the terms parabasis and prosopopeia implies that Derrida uses the former term as de Man does in "The Rhetoric of Temporality": to denote the interruption of the work by the presence of the author. As quoted above, Derrida refers to "the phantoms of all the prosopopeias or parabases which, in de Man's later writing, have been brought in simply to take up the idea of allegory, even irony" (MF 80). But while in "The Rhetoric of Temporality" the interruption by the author is the work of a "self-conscious narrator" who breaks the artistic illusion, Derrida directly conflates parabasis and the irony of the signature, making it the interruptive, catachrestic force that turns thetic text into

autobiography. As we shall see, this conflation places Derrida far closer to parabasis as used by Schlegel and in Greek Attic drama.

De Man writes that the mistake he made in his first essay was to reduce irony to a mode of self-reflexivity. And while Derrida makes self-reflection an important part of his text, the fictionalisation of the self in the work is not simply self-reflexivity, but *auto-interpretation*. Writing the self into the text, using an ironic, anacoluthic signature to make a text about an other also a text on the self means that the text includes “an invaluable periodising auto-interpretation, to be read also as memoirs or a theoretical autobiography, with the fictive, ironic, or allegorical dimension that de Man’s signature imprints on all his texts” (MF 122). Parabasis interrupts the text, turning each text into an autobiography. The autobiography is not merely a mode of self-reflection, but the structural insertion of the self into the text, where it is presented, represented and interpreted. The irony of this autobiographical insertion is not one of a dialectic of the self, but an active structuring of the self within the work, an insertion of alterity into the self as the self is inserted into the text. Reflection occurs, but the face is not the face of the proper or the same.

Thus we can see that although Derrida’s text is firmly grounded in an analysis of de Man’s earlier works on irony and allegory, the irony posited is far closer to de Man’s second essay. In fact, in complexity and subtlety it surpasses both, but can nonetheless be written in terms of de Man’s definition of irony as the permanent parabasis of the allegory of tropes. For Derrida – in this text – the moment of irony, inseparable as it is from the narrative duration of allegory, is the moment of disjunction, difference and interruption of the self-reflexive system of turning and disjunction in general. Thus irony is of the moment but also of duration, a moment inseparable from the greater length. This contamination allows us to now focus on the patterns of irony’s step: parataxis, parabasis, the anacoluthon, and the contaminated performative/constative.

Syntactic Irony

Hobson’s *Jacques Derrida: Opening Lines* presents a masterful reading of Derrida and the functioning of syntax. A semantic understanding of language focuses on signifiers in isolation, understanding the richness of language to come from the ability of each signifier to designate an infinity of signifieds. Against this

Hobson proposes a syntactic approach to the text, where *syntax* describes the structure that arises from the joining of lexemes and phrases in unstable ways, so that terms “stop functioning as foci, centres, and begin functioning as junction points. The phrases are poised on the page, swinging in relation to the sentences adjacent to them, hijacking other grammatical functions”.⁵ The patterns and connections made by units are used, mentioned, quoted, embedded and interwoven between other lexemes and phrases in a way that always “allows for more than, or other than, what we can say, or write”.⁶ Hobson’s understanding of syntax extends to include a “performative” dimension; it is a way of articulating questions “which is not thematised as a conclusion in the work, [which] acts more like a load bearing formation, a way of thinking the questions”.⁷ Thus meaning “is built structurally, out of slippages and losses, out of graftings and cuttings”.⁸ Derrida’s neologisms and paleonyms should not be understood in isolation, but in terms of “strange attractors” or “singularities”; circuits of argument which are put into place by series of terms, so that it is not the lexeme that controls or guides meaning, but the sequence. From these arises an “argument which is not always explicitly signalled”,⁹ and a syntactical pattern which is very much of the rhythm and mode of Derrida’s writing.

Hobson directly, if briefly, associates the syntactical functioning of Derrida’s texts with “a radically original form of irony”.¹⁰ Derrida’s syntactical irony is one which “acts like a perturbing force field round certain words or phrases ... a sudden change of frequency in emission, which can momentarily be received in a different way and at a different place”.¹¹ There is no transcendence in Derrida’s irony, no “human or more-than-human mind with an ironic overview”.¹² It does not progress towards totality or infinity, its “ironic movement is not a change of level, but of current, as it were, like an electronic switching

⁵ Marion Hobson *Jacques Derrida: Opening Lines* (London: Routledge, 1998) 228.

⁶ Hobson, *Derrida* 189.

⁷ Hobson, *Derrida* 8.

⁸ Hobson, *Derrida* 77.

⁹ Hobson, *Derrida* 121.

¹⁰ Hobson, *Derrida* 228.

¹¹ Hobson, *Derrida* 228.

¹² Hobson, *Derrida* 228. In making this point Hobson wishes to distinguish the irony she sees in Derrida’s texts from the irony proposed by Kierkegaard or Schlegel. And while neither syntactic nor paratactic irony are the irony of the (falsely) elevated vantage point, this should by no means imply that irony cannot be manipulated as a tool. It is both that which happens, and that which can be made happen, though never wholly controlled.

mechanism”.¹³ Hobson’s work on ironic syntax in relation to Derrida is to my knowledge the first work that moved away from an investigation of Derrida’s lexemes as semantic units, and there can be little doubt as to its importance. However, as undeniably valuable as her work is, this chapter proposes that Hobson’s formulation contains a number of serious flaws, and that the movement that is occurring would be better named a *paratactic* irony.

Interestingly, Hobson does come rather close to parabolic, and paratactic, irony – her fourth chapter is subtitled “pas sans pas” (step/not without not/step) – and she relates what we recognise as the interruptive movement of anacoluthic syntax to the negative: “Derrida, punning on ‘pas’ as both ‘step’ and ‘not’, relates to the negative the hawing, halting, self-differential movement built out of infinitesimal frequency alterations”.¹⁴ When describing syntax and irony her language revolves around images of anacoluthic, interruptive alterity: as quoted above she uses phrases like “hijacking other grammatical functions”, “an electronic switching mechanism” and “a sudden change of frequency in emission”. In a later essay she writes that irony “pull[s] the thought down into the seas of language, reaching out to the barely anticipated but not-already-formulated. In this writing, the absent is the future of what he will say”.¹⁵ As we will see, this writing of absence steps very close to the irony of parataxis.

Hobson describes “strange attractors” as patterns which “induce a pattern of negotiation, while imposing a relation of interruption – they attract but they are out of reach”.¹⁶ Bennington opines that Hobson mistakenly segregates negotiation and interruption, wanting to make them “two forms of relation to singularities ..., whereas I would want to say that they are *the same*, and that Derrida *says* this”.¹⁷ Hobson thus falls into the trap of detailing pure, uncontaminated oppositions, a trap which the anacoluthic involvement and interruption of parabolic irony avoids. The movement of the strange attractors is also, for Bennington, a somewhat inferior or eidetic version of *différance*. As Bennington writes, in the case of *différance*,

¹³ Hobson, *Derrida* 86.

¹⁴ Hobson, *Derrida* 169.

¹⁵ Hobson, “Derrida’s Irony” 103.

¹⁶ Hobson, *Derrida* 147.

¹⁷ Bennington, *Interrupting* 193.

just as singularity is both given and lost in one and the same moment, so the “identity” of each lexeme is given and lost only by its relative dispersion in the syntax of its occurrences and its relation to the other lexemes. What Hobson is inclined to present as a “strange attractor” always out of reach looks as though it would have to be either pure syntax (pure relationality without terms) or pure lexematicity (pure term without relation); but *différance* and the rest are just bespeaking the becoming syntax of all terms, their dissolution as terms into a syntax which also regularly secretes (or vomits out) such quasi-terms, in a *rhythm* which is that of Derrida’s writing.¹⁸

Bennington argues that Hobson’s formulation of a “strange attractor” moves towards the purity of the eidetic, and away from the contamination that should be posited by syntax. He also argues that she has replaced the emphasis on *process* expressed by Derrida’s multiple quasi-transcendentals with a single term that becomes both eidetic and semantically overloaded: “‘syntax’ might be doing too much work”.¹⁹

The contradiction within Hobson’s argument – a move towards syntax produces a reading centred on semantics, that is, on the term “syntax” – demonstrates the difficulty of presenting a theory/name of the fundamental structure of the mark that resists being elevated to the position of transcendental signifier. As Bennington writes:

how do we understand the proliferation of Derridean lexemes on the one hand as producing a dispersion of singular terms in singular contexts, and on the other as having among themselves a connection which is not of the order of an essence or a common *eidos* (p.67)? How can we grasp the relations between these terms without committing ourselves to the idea that they must all somehow name the same thing, which would then have to have a *proper* name – so that *différance*, for example (or any of the others) would become subordinate with respect to all the other terms, the real name for whatever Derrida is on about? In other words, can we think a dispersion without gathering it around a centre or a single origin point?²⁰

How can this thesis present a theory of the basic or innate ironic functioning of the mark without subscribing to a notion of a *pure* irony, a thetic or eidetic concept with a proper name and place? Bennington describes Hobson’s project as “both powerfully reductive (in that it proposes a quite *specific* syntactic motif as organising a wide range of texts) and endlessly open (in that syntax thus

¹⁸ Bennington, *Interrupting* 190.

¹⁹ Bennington, *Interrupting* 187.

²⁰ Bennington, *Interrupting* 188.

understood just is a principle of multiplication and dispersion)".²¹ The challenge is therefore to find a thinking of dispersion that does not suppress alterity, that emphasises the contamination of terms like negotiation and interruption, that does not posit an eidetic ideal outside the system of differences, and that is neither pure syntax nor pure semantics but the style or rhythm of "the becoming syntax of all terms". Which brings us to *paratactic irony*.

Syntactic Irony to Paratactic Irony

In "The Double Session", describing the *hymen*, which in French means both marriage and separating membrane (hymen in English), Derrida writes:

What counts here is not the lexical richness, the semantic infiniteness of a word or concept, its depth or breadth, the sedimentation that has produced inside it two contradictory layers of signification (continuity and discontinuity, inside and outside, identity and difference, etc.). What counts is the formal or syntactical *praxis* that composes and decomposes it. (DS 220)

Meaning, be it direct or ambiguous, is not produced by a lexeme in isolation, but is generated through juxtaposition, by being *beside* or *between* other lexemes. Meaning is constructed

first and foremost through the syntax, which disposes the "*entre*" in such a way that the suspense is due only to the placement and not to the content of words. ... It is the "between", whether it names fusion or separation, that thus carries all the force of the operation. (DS 220)

As J. L. Austin writes, "properly speaking, what alone has meaning is a *sentence*"²²; it is juxtaposition that produces meaning. The semantic range of the lexeme does not produce excess; it is only when the term is concatenated with other terms that meaning proliferates. The "between" – *entre* – is in French aurally indistinguishable from *antre* – "cave" – and so Derrida inserts great spaces into his conjunctions, as that which joins does so across the mouth of a deep recess. The links between words are spaces of excessive depth, passages that step up to labyrinths of textual chains. Joining becomes interruption, a parabolic, anacoluthic interruption, as the code or context is ironically disrupted by the

²¹ Bennington, *Interrupting* 184.

²² J. L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) 56.

different paths each term can take. Hence we are confronted with the “impossibility of identifying the path *proper* to the letter of the text, of assigning a unique place to the subject, of locating a simple origin” (DS 224).

A concentration on syntax should not be thought to present a single, self-present mark that produces meaning through its position in a particular, unstable sequence. The mark itself is unstable, and its instability can be read not as semantic overloading, but in terms of syntactical compounds. As Derrida writes, signs like *pharmakon*, *hymen*, *différance*,

have a double, contradictory, undecidable value that always derives from their syntax, whether the latter is in a sense “internal”, articulating and combining under the same yoke, *huph’hen*, two incompatible meanings, or “external”, dependent on the code in which the word is made to function. (DS 221)

Huph’hen, which was borrowed by English to create the term *hyphen*, meant “in one” in Ancient Greek, and evolved to form *huphen*, a term indicating a compound or portmanteaux term, wherein two (or more) words are to be read as one. Each mark is a hyphen, a word that contains its own meanings in an internal series with itself. What has been understood as semantic richness or excess would be better understood in terms of *hyphenation*, or the trace of hyphenation, as the multiple signifieds designated by each signifier exist in a hyphenated chain, linked together. This chain forms an internal sequence, but an internal series extending externally, as the chain is linked to synonyms, half meanings, associations, and eventually, the entire linguistic web. The hyphen therefore joins and separates the inside and the outside, parabolically transgressing metaphysical divisions. Thus, like the hymen,

the syntactical composition and decomposition of a sign renders this alternative between internal and external inoperative. One is simply dealing with greater or lesser syntactical units at work, and with economic differences in condensation. Without reducing all these to the same, quite the contrary, it is possible to recognise a certain serial law in these points of indefinite pivoting: they mark the spots of what can never be mediated, mastered, sublated, or dialectised. (DS 221)

The internal and external sequences of the mark(s) are hyphenated, conjoined through interruption. Hence iterability can be understood in terms of syntax, and

the ability of the mark to be repeated and alterable stems from its syntactical ability to link itself to any new context, to hyphenate itself. The mark is never self-present because it is always internally divided by a hyphen, as it contains within itself the cave of the between. It is always anacoluthically interrupted, turning its own code away from itself, stepping across its own joins.

The hyphen can be likened to the movement of *and/or*, or, more accurately, as Derrida outlines in “Et Cetera”, a movement of *and...and*, or even just *and*, where “and” joins and disjoins.²³ Thinking X and Y means thinking X as separate to Y, and therefore thinking of them together also separates them. Deconstruction, Derrida writes, introduces, or rather recognises, “an ‘and’ of association and dissociation at the very heart of each thing” (ETC 282-83). This rule of the “and”, which is a style of ironic hyphenation, is explicitly outlined by Derrida:

there’s something like a rule, a privileged procedure in deconstruction which is, however, neither a method nor an appropriable technique, but an event or a style. The recurrence, the probability of this quasi-rule (a rule without a rule since each time the example is absolutely other) would often go via a sort of disjunctive conjunction at the threatened heart of each conceptual or verbal atom. (ETC 300)

Deconstruction is of hyphenation, an ironic style of interruptive, disjunctive conjunction. The hyphen can itself be thought of as a stylistic stroke. Derrida, speaking in *Spurs* of Nietzsche’s use of distance – *Distanz* – changes the term to *Dis-tanz*. He refers to the hyphen as a “stylistic effect ... which parodies the philosopher’s language *and* the exclamation point, [and] suspends the word *Distanz*” (S 47-49). The “hyphen’s pirouette” creates a “play of silhouettes” (S 49) that suspends the term while sending it to excess, multiplying its possibilities by showing its latent divides, splitting it into sections and subsections.

The hyphen – a stroke which links while separating, anacoluthically interrupting while amalgamating – operates to disseminate meaning. Thus Derrida writes that we find “Dissemination in the folds of the hymen: that is the ‘operation.’ Its steps allow for (no) *method*: no path leads around in a circle toward a first step, nor proceeds from the simple to the complex, nor leads from a beginning to an end” (DS 271). The ability of the hymen – of any mark – to refigure itself depending on the syntax means that “the hymen never presents

²³ Derrida speaks of the theatre of the ‘and’ in “Aphorism Countertime”. “And” is a *contretemps*, a false relation.

itself. It never *is* – in the present –; it has no proper, literal meaning” (DS 229). Constantly pulled in different directions, the mark is never fully (self) present. It always awaits a different place in the series, never meaning in itself, but receiving meaning from its location(s). It is thus *ironic*, never fully there, caught in the temporal delay of a fragmented or hyphenated series, never stepping back to a clear origin or progressing to a definite end, interrupted and interrupting.

Importantly, as Derrida establishes, the “between” itself ceases to simply function syntactically, as

Through the re-marking of its semantic void, it in fact begins to signify. Its semantic void *signifies*, but it signifies spacing and articulation; it has as its meaning the possibility of syntax; it orders the play of meaning. *Neither purely syntactic nor purely semantic*, it marks the articulated opening of that opposition. (DS 222)

Thus the force of conjoining interruption and interrupting conjunction precedes the syntactic/semantic opposition. The ironic force of hyphenation is, as Derrida writes, the *possibility of syntax*, the space that allows syntax and semantics to be. Hence what is required is a term that marks the potential for syntax and semantics, that contains the essence of reordering that syntax contains, while emphasising the disorder, the fragmentary nature of the chain that

dislocates all oppositions. It carries them off, impresses upon them a certain play that propagates itself through all the text’s *moving parts*, *constantly shifting* them, setting them *out of phase*, more or less regularly, through *unequal displacements*, *abrupt slowdowns* or *bursts of speed*, strategic effects of insistence or *ellipsis*, but always inexorably. [emphasis added] (DS 236)

The syntactic/semantic opposition must be stepped away from, not inverted, and the infinite movement and chaotic alterity of the terms emphasised. Thus, in order to better name the “play of articulations splitting up that body or re-inscribing it within sequences it can no longer control” (DS 255) and the force of the “between”, this chapter proposes that the ironic force of the hyphenated mark be recognised, not as *syntactic* irony, but as *paratactic* irony.

Parataxis – *παράταξις* – comes from the Greek meaning “to place side by side” or “to compare”. It places propositions or clauses beside each other without conjunction, so they are joined and yet not joined, grammatically correct and

complete and yet haunted by the absence of the co-ordinating conjunction.²⁴ Parataxis interrupts while conjoining, and brings together only to separate. It places terms and clauses side by side (*entre*) over the abyss (*antre*) of the absent conjunction, promising and yet committing perjury, allowing and requiring the reader to link as she sees fit. Parataxis steps away from the appearance of a logical, inevitable, necessary progression or system, and opens up the possibility of reordering and rewriting. Syntax privileges order at the expense of disorder, and ignores the permanent interruptive potential for reordering. It endorses the product over the process, poem over poesis, destination over path. Each chain of lexemes always signifies beyond the supposedly closed system of its syntax; the excess overwhelming syntax is that of parataxis. Syntax has too much of the system, too much of the authority of the author or reader, too much of the centrality of the subject.²⁵ Paratactic irony is the irony of a fragmented, infinitely interrupted and interrupting system. The ironic, hyphenated force of the *entre* is a paratactic force of potentiality, of possibility and becoming. Parataxis, as the possibility of both syntax and semantics is neither, but allows for both. Its separated terms retain the possibility of a semantic reading, and it thereby does not attempt to disguise the presence of a certain thinking of metaphysics. It is the possibility of both, a mode of writing that acknowledges the semantic and the syntactic while undeniably siding with a form of the latter.²⁶

“Syntax” is often used to describe the style or manner of an author’s prose. While parataxis has not typically had this use, it by no means undermines the importance of style – it *is* (a) style – but a style that while calling attention to the very construct of a text refuses to privilege the author. It is a mode of writing that opens the text to the other, that emphasises the (re)writing of the reader. In paratactic writing a singular syntax is retained, the author’s recognisable

²⁴ A typical example of parataxis would be “I came, I saw, I conquered”.

²⁵ Against this strong syntax could be opposed the Beckettian “syntax of weakness” outlined by Simon Critchley in *On Humour*. For Critchley this comic syntax “can be found throughout Beckett’s work in a whole series of wonderfully self-undoing, self-weakening phrases” (49). It is a syntax that makes us laugh and then calls us into question through that laughter; “the highest laugh, the mirthless laugh, the laugh laughing at the laugh. ... We realise in an instant that the object of laughter is the subject who laughs. After the wave of laughter has hit us with its saline spray, an undertow of doubt threatens to drag us under the water’s surface” (49-50). This self-undoing syntax moves towards parataxis, but imposes a strong sense of doubt and restriction that isn’t insisted upon in the spacing of parataxis.

²⁶ In *The Ear of the Other* Derrida speaks of the *syntaxless syntax* Blanchot uses in *The Step Not Beyond* to approach “death in what I could call a step-by-step procedure of overstepping or of impossible transgression” (EO 19). This syntaxless syntax can be likened to parataxis, and to parabasis – a step which is not, a step which interrupts itself, and steps to transgress.

idiosyncrasies, tone and choice of terms are most definitely not ignored, but the fact that that style is always already anacoluthically interrupted by its own terms is emphasised.

Parataxis places sentences or thoughts side by side without hierarchy or order. It operates, as such, as a mode of fragmentation. Parataxis should not be thought, however, to return to a mode of semantics by dint of effectively removing or reducing the functioning of any terms that don't "mean" – in other words, by privileging categoremes over syncategoremes. Parataxis does not eliminate the syncategorematic so much as open it up – it doesn't specify a conjunction but allows the reader to select one. The fragmented seriality of marks can be thought of a parataxis of affirmation, a "yes, yes, yes" or the syncategorematic "and, and, and" in which "and" separates and conjoins (ETC 288). "And" means "binding, unbinding, conjunction, disjunction, opposition, addition, complement, supplement" (ETC 297) – it is parataxis and hyphenation.

Derrida writes that "What counts is the formal or syntactical *praxis* that composes and decomposes" (DS 220). The term *praxis*, meaning action or practice, also denotes a synthesis of theory and action, or in linguistics, the performative aspect of language, that is, speech as action. This *praxis* is emphasised in a theory of parataxis. Parataxis is a promise always tainted by the possibility of perjury; it presents marks as though ordered and conjoined, but refuses to commit to a definitive or conclusive conjunction. Parataxis is always a literature that says more than thethetic or the propositional, as its statements are never wholly present, forwarding a truth contaminated by the possibility of a lie, presenting a phrase whose (in)completion is haunted by the catachrestic.²⁷

²⁷ Jan Mieszkowski's "Who's Afraid of Anacoluthon?" (*MLN* 124.3 (2009)) argues that syntax is always anacoluthically interrupted, and as such, without using the term, posits a basic paratactic, ironic functioning for syntax.

No grammatical or syntactic line has enough momentum to prevent another "movement" from usurping it, which is to say that any grammar or syntax is at best provisional, a gesture toward the paradigmatic rather than a sovereign model in its own right. At the level of the sentence, clause, or even the individual word, the grammar or syntax in force is at best a work in progress, a project that inevitably creates the illusion of a structuring authority that it does not possess. Anacoluthon reveals that where language is concerned, there is always enough directional movement to guarantee the emergence of at least the semblance of a pattern or a standard, but there can never be enough movement to create a truly monolithic organising schema that can defend itself against the possibility of usurpation. Language can never relate to itself as the unambiguous power to give form that it presents itself to be. (653)

The movement of parataxis can be related to Derrida's reinscription of the metaphor. "White Mythology" "disrupts the opposition of the semantic and the syntactic, and especially the philosophical hierarchy that submits the latter to the former" (WM 270). Derrida proposes without (directly) proposing an ironic, fragmentary interplay of marks that is paratactic, a meaning of interrupted juxtapositions. In a sequence outlining the connections made by metaphors, associations that appear grounded in semantics, Derrida asks if we do not have a

long and hardly visible chain whose first link is quite difficult to exhibit. Rather than a metaphor, do we not have here an "*enigma*", a secret narrative, composed of several metaphors, a *powerful asyndeton* or *dissimulated conjunction* whose essential characteristic is "to describe a fact in *an impossible combination of words*". [emphasis added] (WM 243)

The impossible combinations, the dissimulated conjunctions, the enigmatic connections, the hardly visible – invisible – links and chains describe the movement of paratactic irony. In this passage Derrida uses a direct synonym for parataxis – *asyndeton* – which comes from the Greek for unconnected. What replaces the concentration on diachrony, on univocal truth, on attainable intention, on semantics and semantic overloading, is not simply the syntactic, but a powerful ironic force of productive, and interruptive, parataxis. The danger with an understanding of the chains and juxtapositions as syntax is precisely in the use of the term to signify the signed system of a particular author. Derrida argues that the plurality of metaphor is inseparable from syntax – this can too easily be read as the privileging of a specific syntax, for example, that of metaphysics, or that of a particular author. The plurality of the system within singularities can be found in the term *parataxis*, without restricting the chain to one field or writer.

The path of the ironic, hyphenated, paratactic *pas de métaphore*, the metaphor as anacoluthon, can be traced in the *blanc* of "The Double Session". *Blanc* (white/blank) is a term which inserts itself into itself, inserting a *blanc* into the *blanc*. *Blanc* inserts an interruptive space, the cave of the between, the abyss surrounding the narrow hyphen, into the white, the place of inscription. It is both the absence within the mark that prevents it from being fully present to itself, and the matrix in which work occurs, the absence that gives space to meaning. The space of the *blanc* contains each white object, and each white object is anacoluthically interrupted by the empty white space (of possibility). The plurality

of metaphors and their dissemination produces a tropological structure that turns around itself, collapsing the structure of metaphors. Nor can its excessive turning be said to signify through metonymy: as everything is metonymic, the part is always greater than the whole, and the whole is always smaller than the part, and so the concept of the metonymic collapses. The multiplicity of referencing that occurs, the doubling and redoubling, the folding and refolding stems from a force that does not present the simple turn of a trope, but the (re)turn of the trope of tropes, of the quasi-trope – irony. The *blanc* is the space between phrases in ironic parataxis, the divide that separates and conjoins, that makes each metaphor ironically excessive. The blank space is the space of infinite interruption and infinite production, an invisible hyphen or full stop.²⁸ It calls attention to what has not been said, to what cannot be said, and to that which lies outside propositional speech or thematic content. The blanks are present through their absence, are wholly (in)visible, and turn each ordered system into a fragmented, ironic system of parabolic parataxis.²⁹

To return to Bennington, we must ask if we have answered his criticisms of Hobson's syntactic irony. Paratactic irony is a thinking of dispersion and alterity that acknowledges the (perhaps) inescapable tendency of the reader/writer to impose an ordered system on the text. It presents potentiality, allowing an order to be presumed/imposed, but without that order irreparably eliminating excess. Parataxis, as an ironic hyphen, will always represent contamination, and specifically the intermingling of engagement and disruption, as parataxis shows that any engagement *is* a disruption. Its potentiality, its force of becoming that is process rather than product does not eliminate the semantic nor the syntactic, but gives them space. And its ideal or eidetic form? Parataxis is neither order nor

²⁸ Julia Ponzio writes that Derrida uses the Greek word *rytmos* to refer to the law of spacing because *rytmos* does not imply the orderly sequence of "rhythm", but is "a form that is always about to change or to break up" ("The Rhythm of Laughter: Derrida's Contribution to a Syntactic Model of Interpretation" *Derrida Today* 2.2 (2009) 235). Thus the rhythm of Derrida's *blancs* are paratactic and anacoluthic.

²⁹ In *Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Ironic Imagination* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987) Alan Wilde's description of modernist irony closely resembles the irony of parataxis. He writes that

the clue to the ironic vision lies ... in forms that render not merely the fact of disparity but its informing principles, not only the unconnected elements of life but, more tellingly, the disconnection itself: those unbridgeable spaces that define as they disfigure the map of modern life. (30)

Irony is, for Wilde, horizontally paratactic – side by side – rather than vertically metaphoric – one behind the other.

chaos, system nor nonsystem, and exists only (im)purely. It is a linguistic structure of conjunction and disjunction and has no correspondent Form. As Derrida writes in relation to the (paratactic) *pharmakon*, it has no ideal identity. Any name will unfortunately hyphenate a mark to the proper; by naming the recurring force in Derrida work and the general system of marks paratactic irony a reduction has been perpetrated, but it is a reduction of deep blanks and caves.

Parabatic Irony

Deconstruction is the getting ready for the coming of the other, a preparation which “comes back in the step [pas] – and also as the step – of the other” (PI 39), and is often associated with a step or turn:

Deconstruction ... does not settle for methodical procedures, it opens up a passageway, it marches ahead and marks a trail; its writing is not only performative, it produces rules – other conventions – for new performatives and never installs itself in the theoretical assurance of a simple opposition between performative and constative. Its *process* [démarche] involves an affirmation. (PI 23)

Deconstruction is the opening up of unexpected pathways, and the step it takes is the ironic step of parabasis, an aporetic step/not that transgresses limits and dead-ends. Aporia, often associated with irony, is “the possibility of the impossible, the ‘play’ of a certain excess in relation to any mechanical movement, oriented process, path traced in advance, or teleological programme” (WA xvii). Aporia is “the very condition of the *step* [pas], or even the experience of pathbreaking, route (*via rupta*), march [*marche*], decision, event: the coming of the other, in sum, of writing and desire” (WA xvii). Aporia, so long associated with Socrates’ ironic dialogues, in Derrida’s texts is redirected, and it becomes, rather than a dead-end, the way of pathfinding, a new step. Deconstruction’s step/not of constructive aporia is the step of parabasis.

The term “parabasis” – *παράβασις* – is derived from the Greek verb *parabainein* – “to step forward”. It describes a dramatic device used in Greek Attic comedies whereby the flow of the play’s primary action was interrupted when the chorus stepped out to speak directly to the audience. During the action of the play proper the chorus watched the actors, but for the parabasis they turned to face the audience, and spoke on a number of themes that did not directly relate

to the plot of the play itself. In the course of the seven sections of parabasis the fame and skill of the poet was lauded and defended, his rivals attacked, the audience flattered or mocked, the gods and the muses praised, humorous and satirical stories told and plot explanations given.³⁰ Parabasis steps back from the play's plot without being wholly removed from it; it breaks the dramatic illusion of the play and introduces a sense of otherness and estrangement. The chorus steps away from its role as spectator and becomes a central spectacle, commenting on the play and the poet with an ambiguous voice, as it presents opinions which are undecidably those of characters, performers, the poet or the public. The poet's defence, for example, was delivered in the first or third person; as G. M. Sifakis writes; "In none of the comedies does the chorus have a consistent and unalterable dramatic character".³¹

While a digression and complete in itself, the parabasis was also highly intertextual, referencing other plays by the poet and his rivals. The parabasis, writes Hubbard, "gives us critical insight into the drama's articulation of meaning".³² The parabasis was a "self-questioning, self-critical" form, a "highly context-bound and ironic rhetorical epideix[is]".³³ The parabasis was therefore a digression or interruption of the plot by a voice or chorus of voices presenting a commentary on the poet, play, and political situation from an undecidable point of view. It was a monologue or soliloquy that in its engagement with past plays and themes was also a dialogue, which the involvement of multiple voices rendered – even when spoken by one – a cacophonous polylogue. It was self-deprecating and boastful, so much so that Hubbard writes: "Nowhere are the postures of *alazoneia* and *eirōneia* more evident and nowhere is the question of self-knowledge more in the foreground than in the parabasis".³⁴

Schlegel's most famous definition of irony – "irony is a permanent parabasis" (PF 668) – is read by many as referring to a breaking of illusion, and hence German Romantic irony is understood to be that which calls attention to the work as "unreal" or fictive. However, reading the step of parabasis as mode of

³⁰ Thomas K. Hubbard, *The Mask of Comedy: Aristophanes and the Intertextual Parabasis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991) 17-23.

³¹ G. M. Sifakis, *Parabasis and Animal Choruses: A Contribution to the History of Attic Comedy* (London: Athlone, 1971) 32.

³² Hubbard, *Mask* ix.

³³ Thomas K. Hubbard, "Parabatic Self-Criticism and the Two Versions of Aristophanes' 'Clouds'" *Classical Antiquity* 5.2 (1986) 197.

³⁴ Hubbard, *Mask* 7.

Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* is a misreading, both of Romantic irony and of the role of parabasis within Greek comedy. G. M. Sifakis goes so far as to claim that parabasis could not have been an interruption of dramatic illusion as Greek audiences would have never been involved in a dramatic illusion of reality as we understand it. He argues that Greek drama did not attempt to realistically represent human life on stage and there was no urge to understand actors as the characters they portrayed. Since the actors were only ever understood as actors, there was no illusion that was broken when they dropped their roles. Hubbard, however, disagrees with this reading; even when theatre is highly stylised audiences accept the actors as the people/gods/forces they portray. When the characters drop masks to present themselves differently there is an undeniable change in reception. Such playing with forms was, he feels, an important part of Greek comedy.³⁵

Raymond Immerwahr notes that Schlegel referred to the dissolution of illusion by the distinct and separate name of “arabesque”,³⁶ but even without this information it should be clear that the parabasis performs a more subtle role than simply dividing reality from illusion. The interruption that takes place in parabasis is scripted, and as such as fictional as the primary action. While the chorus members may literally or metaphorically unmask themselves, and speak as “real” people, that is, as actors or as the poet, what disturbs the fiction of the drama is another fiction. The audience is recognised, but it is recognised as audience, as a construct inherently complicit in the artifice of theatre. The interruption is bound by the laws of the play, and as such plays its own interruption. Thus the parabasis does not serve to remind the audience of the fiction of the play, and thereby highlight the reality of that which lies beyond the play, but rather shows that the artistic fiction of the play is a reflection on and of the artistic fiction of the world, which has no more “reality” than that of the play. Hence the German romantic demand as voiced by Schlegel: “we demand irony: we demand that events, men, in short the play of life, be taken as play and be represented as such” (DP 89). Parabasis becomes an overstepping of the boundaries of fiction and reality, a crossing or transgression of their limits that presents a strange or uncanny version of life and of drama.

³⁵ Hubbard, *Mask* 28.

³⁶ Raymond Immerwahr, “The Practice of Irony in Early German Romanticism”, *Romantic Irony*, ed. Frederick Garber (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1988) 82.

Parabasis exemplifies the movement of interruption as well as a transgression and elliptical turning. The skewed step of parabasis is a permanent step, which is an interrupted or failed step; a step that steps over itself. In stepping it steps away from stepping and thus turns away from itself, and can be linked to the double meaning in French of *pas* – it is a step [*pas*] and not [*pas*]. As a permanent step there is both movement and stasis in parabasis. As an anacoluthon the parabolic work turns in and away from itself, disrupting discourse by conversing on that discourse, a self-renewing and ceaseless interruption that fragments the work with simultaneous dissymmetric voices. It presents itself and comments on itself. The parabasis is then a digression, an interruption, a shift in focus and theme. And yet it can also become the object of primary focus; a contemporary account of Aristophanes' *Frogs* states that "The play was so much admired because of the parabasis contained in it that it was actually restaged".³⁷

When the chorus speaks in the parabasis it speaks with an ambiguous voice, moving between monologue, dialogue and polylogue. The voices of many are presented as the voice of one, and yet the one is so undecidable as to be the voices of many. The single unit of the chorus comprises many separate identities, and so its totality is always split. It is always more and less than the sum of its parts. It is part of the play and not part of the play, both at its centre and wholly marginalised. Relative roles are turned upside down – the poet becomes a character, as does the audience, while the actors cease to be, within a carefully constructed illusion, actors. It is play and "literary self-defence",³⁸ a poetico-literary performative. It is a step forward and a step back, a transgressive, skewed step that is and is not the step of self-reflection. It crosses boundaries and markers; it is always inside and outside. It provides a path, a point of entry, a footbridge, and yet never quite takes you to your planned destination. It is a certain gait, a particular way of walking, a rhythm or style. It is reality and fiction, autobiography and self-defence, a performance and a description. It interrupts and continues, it explains and mystifies.

³⁷ Alan H. Sommerstein, *Talking About Laughter and Other Studies in Greek Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 254.

³⁸ Hubbard, *Mask* 19.

Irony and Performativity

In “The Concept of Irony” de Man writes: “Irony consoles and it promises and it excuses. It allows us to perform all kinds of performative linguistic functions which seem to fall out of the tropological field, but also to be very closely connected with it” (AI 165). Irony is a productive force, an interruption that generates excess. In “This Strange Institution Called Literature” (1992) Derrida describes the literature that inspires him as containing a *performative* element: it comprises texts which are “literary works *and* works which say a lot about literature and therefore about themselves, works whose performativity, in some sense, appears the greatest possible in the smallest space” (SI 46-47). This understanding of the performative has been retained by a number of critics; Michael Naas, for example, writes that “the way Derrida says things, the way his texts are performative, is inseparable from *what* he says and the claims he makes”.³⁹ A performative statement, for Naas, is one that does something, that engages the reader and reflexively enacts what it describes.

In “This Strange Institution” Derrida understands the performative to occur when literature enacts what it says, so that the work interrogates itself and in so doing changes language itself:

this experience of writing is “subject” to an imperative: to give space for singular events, to invent something new in the form of acts of writing which no longer consist in a theoretical knowledge, in new constative statements, to give oneself over to a poetico-literary performativity at least analogous to that of promises, orders, or acts of constitution or legislation which do not only change language, or which, in changing language, change more than language. (SI 55)

What Derrida terms *poetico-literary performativity* was seen as the perfect Romantic, ironic work and pinnacle of literary achievement by Schlegel, and as a form inevitably produced by the text by Blanchot.⁴⁰ In “This Strange Institution” Derrida understands performative literature to produce a work that is and produces more than propositional statements and descriptions. This literature *promises*, and in promising produces truths and events in a way that is neither literary nor functional, neither poetic nor legal.

³⁹ Michael Naas, *Taking on the Tradition: Jacques Derrida and the Legacies of Deconstruction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003) xxi.

⁴⁰ See “The Wooden Bridge” in *The Infinite Conversation*.

The performative/constative opposition was first proposed by J. L. Austin in a lecture series given at Harvard in 1955. The constative is a true or false judgement or description, while a performative is that which performs the action to which it refers, so that in saying “I name this ship X” a ship becomes named, or in saying “I promise to lend you my book” an act of promising takes place. However, as Austin began to complicate felicitous and infelicitous instances of the performative, the distinctions began to dissolve. Verbs that appear to function only as performatives – I promise, I order, I bet – become constatives in different tenses and outside of first person present indicative use – “I ordered him”. The infelicity that occurs in performatives can also be seen to figure in constatives: the sentence “The King of France is bald” is neither true nor false but invalid, as France does not currently have a monarchy. Furthermore, the constative statement “We will go for dinner” can also be understood as a promise: “(I promise you) that we will go for dinner”, and hence as a performative. Even the introduction of a new set of divisions – locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary⁴¹ – failed to keep the categories from mutual contamination. Not only is the distinction unclear, it also becomes apparent that performatives are not a particular type of constative; instead constatives are in the category of performatives.

Austin argued that intentionality impacts the success or failure of a performative not in the sense of someone inwardly or emotionally “not meaning it”, but in that all must know that a bet or promise is intended by the context. Which means that the context must be “serious”, that is, “I must not be joking or writing a poem”.⁴² Performatives fail – are infelicitous – when certain conditions aren’t met, when the interlocutor “doesn’t listen, or takes it as ironical, or wasn’t responsible for whatever it was, and so on”.⁴³ As Austin writes:

a performative utterance will, for example, be *in a particular way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in a soliloquy. ... Language in such circumstances is in special ways – intelligibly – used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use – ways which fall under the doctrine of the *etiolations* of language. All this we are *excluding* from consideration. Our performative

⁴¹ In saying “You had better watch out” (locutionary act), I threatened her (illocutionary act), which scared her (perlocutionary act).

⁴² J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon University Press, 1975) 9.

⁴³ Austin *How* 106.

utterances, felicitous or not, are to be understood as issued in ordinary circumstances.⁴⁴

A literary, tropological or theatrical situation is for Austin a marginal and non-serious instance of the performative, in which the performative is quoted or mimicked out of context, and is thus ineffective and void.

Austin's performativity, in its (unobtainable) uncontaminated state, is an act of absolutely reflexive communication, where words immediately produce an act according to recognisable rules and contexts. It is logocentric and operates through absolute correspondence. All speech acts have an effect, but Austin attempted to isolate the pure act whereby the words do not describe an already existent state, or represent it in a new way, but produce the event of which they speak. The performative presumes upon immediacy, presence, comprehensibility, a clear context and legitimacy. Any performative that does not correspond to these conditions either simply fails or fails as it is parasitic or secondary to the normal functioning of the performative.

It is these qualities that form the basis of Derrida's uneasy relationship with the performative. At the basis of this disagreement is communication itself, as Austin's formula depends on the existence of "a concept that is unique, univocal, rigorously controllable, and transmittable" (LI 1). For Derrida communication is not the transmission of *a* meaning, as an utterance possesses potential meanings of irreducible plurality that cannot be dismissed by context related interpretation. A speech act does not fail because of an overt confusion as to whether something is spoken ironically; this failure is inscribed as possibility into every apparently successful instance. As Derrida writes, what Austin excludes as anomalous "is the determined modification of a general citationality – or rather a general iterability – without which there would not even be a 'successful' performative" (LI 17). The ability or possibility to "inauthentically cite" an original statement is not the misuse of an authentic speech act but a result of the iterable "force" of the mark. We are presented "with different kinds of marks or chains of iterable marks and not with an opposition between citational utterances, on the one hand, and singular and original event-utterances, on the other" (LI 18).

⁴⁴ Austin *How* 22.

The performative literature that captivated Derrida was “a certain practice of fiction, the intrusion of an effective simulacrum or of disorder into philosophical writing” (SI 39).⁴⁵ Thus Derrida’s literary performativity is neither conventional nor simply reflexive; the disorder that it introduces steps beyond the immediate correlation of the traditional performative. It is a performativity in which the elliptical, quasi-reflexive step oversteps boundaries, overproduces, defies contexts and undoes the law of genre. Following on from this, a performative mode of philosophy is a mode that plays with the force or the economy of literature to reflect more than itself; that enacts a non-propositional engagement with constative knowledge, that questions the constative nature of knowledge itself, and that is haunted by its own impossibility and potential fictionality. Through performativity a skewed reflexivity is introduced into a text, a disjunction and a disorder that produces truth and untruths.

In *Memoires for Paul de Man* Derrida presents the poetico-literary performative – presenting an argument while enacting that argument – as the performance of a descriptive exegesis, that is, as a contaminated constative/performative. As Derrida writes:

These texts do not present themselves as texts *on* the theme of the promise; they demonstrate – show and envelope at the same time – the performative structure of the text in general *as* promise, including that of the demonstrative text, that which Paul de Man signs. (MF 93)

“This structure”, Derrida writes, “never exists without disturbing – I might even say perverting – the tranquil assurance of the subject of what we today call a ‘performative’” (MF 93). Thus, the irony of the signature, noted above as the interruptive doubling whereby a thetic text is also an autobiography, is the contamination of the performative and the constative: the exegetical description (constative) is also an autobiographical confession (performative).

Over the course of his career Derrida employed the term “performative” with varying degrees of comfort, as he recognised that the performative names an important force, but was clearly uncomfortable with its traditional, referential use. While he commends Austin for recognising a mode of communication which “is not limited strictly to the transference of a semantic content that is already

⁴⁵ For example, the style Derrida employed in *Glas* or “Plato’s Pharmacy” – a writing of and on philosophy on the borders of literature and philosophy.

constituted and dominated by an orientation towards truth” (LI 13-14), he is clearly troubled by what he calls in *Rogues* the power of the “I” that neutralises the eventfulness of the event (R 84). Throughout his texts Derrida anacoluthically interrupts his work with a term of *pharmakon*-like ambiguity; at times, like the “poetico-literary performative” (SI 55), it is used with approbation, at times it is strongly associated with conformity and intentionality – “In the strict sense, a performative still presupposes too much conventional institution to break the mirror” (PI 46). At others the term is used to denote a *performance* rather than Austin’s performative, and in *Spectres of Marx* Derrida terms *performative interpretation* “that which transforms the very thing it interprets” (SM 63), although he acknowledges that this is an unusual usage.⁴⁶

In “Signature Event Context” Derrida describes the performative utterance as “the most ‘event-ridden’ utterance there is” (LI 19).⁴⁷ However, in “Typewriter Ribbon” he writes that the force of an event is “irreducible to the force or the power of a performative, even if it gives to the performative itself, to what is called the *force* of the performative, its chance and its effectiveness” (WA 235). A performative speech act traditionally functions through a direct correspondence between speaker, words and situation. This predictability means that where the performative is, an event worthy of the name cannot arrive.⁴⁸ Yet not only is language itself a promise, Derrida’s texts have always been promises, appeals,

⁴⁶ Derrida also refers to

the *appeal* or the political injunction ... the originary performativity that does not conform to pre-existing conditions ... but whose force of *rupture* produces the institution or the constitution, the law itself, which is to say also the meaning that ... appears to have guaranteed it in return. (SM 36-37)

⁴⁷ The system on which the self and knowledge is founded is, according to de Man, based on a performative, catachrestic act of linguistic positing: “There is first a performative, the act of positing, the original catachresis, which then moves to a system of tropes; a kind of anamorphosis of tropes takes place, in which all the tropological systems are engendered, as a result of this original act of positing” (AI 176).

⁴⁸ Bennington’s investigation of the phrase *worthy of the name* argues that it relates to the (ironic) logic of necessary (im)possibility: “any X worthy of its name has to be thought of in intimate relation with what seems to threaten its very possibility even as it makes it possible” (8). Every performative worthy of the name is threatened by the necessary possibility of failure, every act of hospitality is one in the name of an absolute hospitality with which it never coincides. Operating through a structural necessity of ironic force/weakness, the most worthy is “marked by a kind of inner unworthiness” (8), and succeeds only through aporia and failure. Concepts – most particularly metaphysical concepts – fail to live up to their promises, but what is brought low is not the promise itself, but “its specific metaphysical instantiations, which leave the promissory dimension open” (10). A hospitality that is worthy of the name only in being unworthy of the name leaves us with a promise of hospitality, a hospitality aspiring to an impossible worthiness. An event worthy of the name is the aspiration to openness. (Geoffrey Bennington, “In Dignity: Worthy of the Name of Michael Naas”, 14 Sept. 2010, <<http://www.fordhampress.com/detail.html?id=9780823229598>>).

confessions. In “The University Without Condition” he describes his text as “less a thesis, or even a hypothesis, than a *declarative* engagement, an *appeal* in the form of a *profession of faith*” (my emphasis) (WA 202). Derrida’s texts partake of a performativity that creates a monstrous event, the impossible performative event that is the only possible event.

Here again, to think *both* the machine *and* the performative event together remains a monstrosity to come, an *impossible* event. Therefore the only possible event. But it would be an event that, this time, would no longer happen without the machine. Rather, it would happen by the machine. (WA 74)

The paradox of the performative, mechanical event also serves to distinguish between irony and the event in de Man and Derrida. De Man’s text machine is the force of arbitrary, automated disruption of meaning that occurs in the text. It undoes reflexivity and narrative consistency, introducing arbitrariness and the aleatory. It employs, as Derrida writes, the “dissociative, dismembering, fracturing, disarticulating, and even disseminal power that de Man attributes to the letter” (WA 151). The ironic, parabolic machine of Derrida’s texts is unprogrammable and anagrammatical, and also interrupts the unity of the subject, and language. Yet it is also a subjectile, a typewriter ribbon, a printing machine, that does not simply disrupt but also produces, that creates an event, interrupting the narrative and the reflexive while being their condition of possibility. The mechanistic in Derrida plays an important structural role of (im)possibility, and is the contamination of the singular and mechanical reproduction, of singularity and iterability.

The effects of de Man’s text machine can be seen in Miller’s descriptions of irony. For him irony is “corrosive”,⁴⁹ that which

functions mechanically in detachment from any controlling center or centers, just as indirect discourse, which is irony as an operative principle of narration, can no longer be certainly identified as spoken or written by anyone in particular. ... Irony can only be stabilised by an arbitrary act of the interpreter stilling the unstillable and ignoring other possibilities of meaning. No passage in a narrative, short or long, partial or incomplete, will stay motionless long enough, unless killed by the critic, in her or his

⁴⁹ Miller, *Reading* 177.

rage for certainty, to form the stable base for a further journey or line of interpretation.⁵⁰

Miller's irony is "a form of endless looping or feedback" which means that the interpreter remains "suspended interminably in an impossible attempt to still the passage's internal movement so that it can be used as a firm stepping-off place for a more complete journey of interpretation".⁵¹ Against the looping and suspension of Miller's irony, inherited from de Man's text machine, is the aporias of Derrida's irony that is productive of new pathways and events.⁵²

Hence Derrida conceives of a performative that is not simply and directly reflexive, grounded in presence and convention. His performative is always anacoluthically interrupted by its contamination with the constative, and by what he terms the *perperformative*.⁵³ The perperformative draws attention to the fact that every attempt to produce a simple, performative reflexivity between saying and doing is always undone. A perperformative is a performative that knows it cannot saturate context, that the trace of a different (mis)step will always haunt it and that it thereby never can possess the immediacy and totality that Austin proposed. The performative is always an ironic, interrupted, failed perperformative that steps away from intention and cognition. In *Memoires for Paul de Man* Derrida describes how de Man changes Heidegger's *die Sprache spricht* (language speaks) to *die Sprache verspricht (sich)* (language promises (itself)). To speak is to promise, to remember is to promise the future. The subject and the comprehension of the subject begins with the post-originary and performative modality of promissory speech. However, as *ver* is a German prefix close to the English *mis*, *versprechen* calls to *misspeak*, and so in German the

⁵⁰ Miller *Reading* 175.

⁵¹ Miller *Reading* 163.

⁵² This is not to say that either Miller or de Man see irony as simply negative and destructive, nor that this thesis argues that irony is not disruptive, but that the language with which irony is described shows an unfortunate tendency to emphasise stasis or restriction rather than potentiality and possibility.

⁵³ Discussing marks or signs of authority, in "Envois" the writer of the postcards distinguishes the "normal" sign of legitimacy and authority that is found at the end of an epistle – the signature – from the sign used by Plato at the beginning of his correspondences: "God" for the serious letters, "gods" for those that are less so. Plato introduces a signature, a sign that divides between the serious and the less serious, reality and fiction, truth and falsehood; a sign which is "visibly destined to Searle and company" (E 136). This mark that purportedly labels and divides is, however, presented and explained in one of Plato's letters whose authenticity is disputed. It hence becomes "the master of the perperformative" (E 136) as it supposedly reflexively produces truth and authenticity, it immediately promises and allows the reader to understand the context. But of course it doesn't; it is a performative that steps deliberately awry. It does not lie, it undoes the ability to differentiate between truth and fabrication.

promise is always tainted by the possibility of a false promise or perjury. Thus de Man's performative *language promises (itself)* is Derrida's ironic perperformative *language promises/perjures (itself)*.

The shifting nature and unforeseeable destiny of the performative in each of Derrida's texts – be it dismissed as a restrictive, totalising category or employed as a force of interruptive, contaminated possibility – is exemplary of a certain ironic, anacoluthic style that Derrida employs. His texts are interrupted by the performative, as it introduces an unpredictable excess. More so than one of his non-synonymous substitutions which, while acting as quasi-transcendentals, tend to be somewhat more fixed in meaning,⁵⁴ the performative – (Austin's) neologism and (Derrida's) paleonym – sneaks into Derrida's texts, each time wearing a slightly different mask. It sends the texts in unexpected directions, interrupting and conjoining, describing and performing events, a theoretical point analysed, a mode of invention implemented, a style espoused. The performative/constative is thus performed and constatively described within Derrida's work, and this overdetermined approach is what this thesis calls an ironic, nonthetic style, a mode of writing which strives to push language to its limits.

The Performative Force of Irony

Irony is construed in this thesis as a *force*, a force of perperformative reworking. Derrida describes force as “the common but always different possibility of the ‘movement’ of ‘life,’ of ‘desire,’ of impulses” (N 35). A force is something that performs and produces, propels and pushes. It is essentially a “very common name for designating that for which we do not have a clearly expressible concept in a given philosophical code. In philosophy, the value of force has always been in representing what resisted conceptual analysis” (N 35). Force is, like irony, essentially always differential, lacks substance, and always escapes definition. Derrida writes:

when I name *force* I am thinking of a differentiality, which thus, as differentiality, is also immediately trace or writing, a network of marks, and marks that are codeable, like any mark, in iterability, and at the same time inscribe and erase themselves or inscribe and can erase themselves. (N 35)

⁵⁴ Insofar as any mark is ever fixed.

Force is something indefinable that steps up, like a trace or writing, while stepping back, or stepping up while covering its tracks. Like a mark, as a mark, its proper action is to erase itself, and thus “force is itself also a weakness. It is a manner of not appearing” (N 35). Force is powerful and feeble, and is thus, in a sense, unreliable, stepping in any number of possible directions. Force is not free and infinite play, but something that can and will push in the opposite direction. Force operates under the law of a structural ruse or twist so that the weakest becomes the strongest. Derrida’s force is an ironic force of weakness and strength, that which ancoluthically interrupts itself. This ironic force, operating because of the mark, operating in the mark, is the force of iterability and is a force because of iterability. It is not a power, because it is not something. Rather, it is “always inscribed in a space where a ruse (not a subjective ruse but a ruse of structure) is possible, making the weakest strongest” (N 35). The force of structural irony is and stems from a “ruse” that is, as Royle writes, not a “space of play that would be tantamount simply to frivolity or having fun. It is a question of trying to reckon with the force of Derrida’s language in terms of what we might provisionally call the counter-hoax”.⁵⁵

The ironic force, the structural “ruse” or “counter-hoax” is inextricable from the iterable mark, that which “multiplies and divides itself internally ... a principle of indetermination, chance, randomness, or destinerring” (MC 360). *A priori* divided and internally unstable, Derrida’s mark is iterable, that is, repeatable and in the repetition alterable. It cannot be grounded in one single finite identity to the extent that it can never be used again: it must be wholly capable of being remarked. It is divided, and never present to itself, never belonging to its own category. Iterability

alters, contaminating parasitically what it identifies and enables to repeat “itself”; it leaves us no choice but to mean (to say) something that is (already, always, also) other than what we mean (to say), to say something other than what we say *and* would have wanted to say, to understand something other than...etc.. (LI 62)

Iterability means that creating firm divisions between intended and expressed meanings is immediately problematic. Iterability functions parasitically; it is always the para-site, the site within language that is beside, near, past, beyond or

⁵⁵ Royle, *Memory* 94.

contrary to intention, context, presence, location. Iterability is irony, it is the structure of the mark that enables irony to be. It is the parasitic, perperformative force we term irony.

Like iterability *différance* functions ironically, containing within itself the “mute irony” (DI 3) of the anacoluthic letter *a* that interrupts the code and signification, permitting “the complex structure of a weaving, an interlacing which permits the different threads and different lines of meaning – or of force – to go off again in different directions” (DI 3). As the temporal delay of a detour *différance* disrupts presence, as the mark keeps within itself the mark of the past element, and calls to – thus containing – the mark of a future element. It ironically introduces a temporal exigency, a fragmentary temporality.⁵⁶

Claire Colebrook refers to Derrida as “an exemplary figure in the history of ironic philosophy”,⁵⁷ associating his irony with the structural functioning of iterability. She sees “an essential irony at the structural root of concepts; when we speak we use a system that precedes all use and that can therefore have effects that exceed all intent”.⁵⁸ However, she makes the serious error of understanding the mark – which she refers to as “concept” – solely in terms of its repeatability, that is, she considers the essential quality of the mark the fact that each time it is used it remains recognisable and the same. She therefore states that for Derrida “concepts must have strict boundaries”.⁵⁹ Because the meaning of the mark is always in excess of context a text will say more than the author intends, and “Derrida can look at how a concept works in a text such that what the text *wants to say* is belied by the force of the concept’s *said*”.⁶⁰ Colebrook overemphasises the rigidity and stability of the mark at the expense of its radical difference and instability. While the mark has a “*certain* self-identity” [emphasis added] (LI 10), this is no more than a “minimal remainder” (LI 53) of the same that is retained in alteration. The mark’s self-identity is always contaminated in advance by

⁵⁶ See introduction for Behler on irony and *différance*.

⁵⁷ Clare Colebrook *Irony in the Work of Philosophy* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002) 32.

⁵⁸ Colebrook *Philosophy* 37.

⁵⁹ Colebrook *Philosophy* 34. It should be noted that this is not repeated in her later work *Irony*. Here Colebrook reads Derrida’s irony through contaminated contexts, *différance*, and critique from within.

⁶⁰ Colebrook *Philosophy* 34. Colebrook expresses the traditional split in irony between intended meaning and expressed meaning with the terms saying and said, where the *saying* is the ironist’s intended meaning and the *said* the expressed material open to interpretation.

discrepancy, by unthought-of alterations and contexts that through the most minimal shift alter the mark.

Iterability is the force which makes “the statement of belonging an ironical exercise” (LO 72). The ultimate element that comprises our every means of communication is ironic, divided and non-present to itself. The style and functioning of Derrida’s texts is not simply tropological, but the performance of a force and event that productively interrupts, that disjoins and conjoins to produce excess. Derrida’s interest in performativity is an interest in poesis, or production. He is interested in a certain productive force that anacoluthically, uncontrollably interrupts. This force, which is also a style, interrupts and changes every mark, and is the force of irony. Derrida’s excessive, experimental style is the deliberate espousal of an ironic mode of writing which produces and reflects on this excess, which is a promise, a lie, a production, a work and theory on that work.

Irony and the Anacoluthon

Anacoluthon comes from the Greek *ἀνακόλουθον* meaning “wanting sequence”, comprising “not” and “following”. A faulty, parabolic step, a failure to take the expected or proper path, an anacoluthon occurs when the syntax of a sentence or passage is disrupted, the disjunction thereby producing unexpected links and connections. In “The Concept of Irony” de Man terms an “interruption of the narrative line” (AI 178) a parabasis or an anacoluthon, thereby equating their ruptures.⁶¹ In “Excuses (Confessions)” he outlines the contamination without convergence or assimilation that occurs between the performative and the constative. The forms of speech act intersect without contact like the chiasmus, and the point of this interruptive intersection is the

anacoluthon; in the language of representational rhetoric, one could also call it parabasis, a sudden revelation of the discontinuity between two rhetorical codes. This isolated textual event ... is disseminated throughout the text and the anacoluthon is extended over all the points of the figural line or allegory; in a slight extension of Friedrich Schlegel’s formulation, it becomes the permanent parabasis of an allegory (or figure), that is to say, irony. Irony is no longer a trope but the undoing of the deconstructive

⁶¹ In *Singularities: Extremes of Theory in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) Thomas Pepper compares the disjunction of the parabasis and the anacoluthon to an *absolute construction* – a phrase independent of its grammatical surroundings. It is the co-ordination of that which won’t co-ordinate (88-93).

allegory of all tropological conditions, the systematic undoing, in other words, of understanding. As such, far from closing off the tropological system, irony enforces the repetition of its aberration. (AO 300-01)

In *Without Alibi* Derrida also names the ironic force that enables the mutual contamination and interruption of codes as anacoluthic. In “‘Le Parjure’, *Perhaps*: Storytelling and Lying” Derrida defines the anacoluthon as “a rupture in the consequence, an interruption in the sequence itself, within a grammatical syntax or an order in general, in an agreement, thus also in a set, whatever it may be, in a community” (WA 181). As Derrida writes, the “striking” and “productive” anacoluthon

assures a powerful general formalisation even as it remains rooted and forever inscribed in the fictional singularity of a corpus that *already* produces it in itself, like a sort of general theorem, like a generalisable theoretical fiction, if I can put it that way, like a fiction having the value of a theoretical truth and an ethical dimension. ... Doubtless more than a figure of rhetoric, despite appearances, it signals in any case toward the *beyond* of rhetoric *within* rhetoric. Beyond grammar *within* grammar. (WA 166-67)

The anacoluthon – irony – is for Derrida the *perhaps*, an undecidable point whereby the text can move in any direction, and where in interrupting the text it moves the text beyond itself. Interruption in the case of the anacoluthon is the production of an excess, the insertion of overdetermination into a rupture.

In “Who’s Afraid of Anacoluthon?” Jan Mieszkowski describes the anacoluthon as a use of language often read as a misuse, and thus both poetic device and dismissible error.

Anacoluthon is thus both super-figural – the extension of creativity in language use to transformations in the rules of syntax and grammar themselves – and sub-figural, almost too deviant to register as a coherent representational gesture. As a figure for the difference between a departure from literal language and a mistake, anacoluthon is at once the figure of figures and a figure for the dissolution of figure, the collapse of the sustained comparisons between figurative and literal instances of language that allow for figuration to emerge in the first place.⁶²

⁶²Mieszkowski 652-53. Mieszkowski’s description of the anacoluthon in terms of the X of X(s), the figure of figures, echoes of a pattern that arises again and again with irony and ironic terms. Irony is that which disturbs the “meta”; it is itself and that which affects itself, irony and irony of irony.

The anacoluthon is at the border of figuration and disfiguration – an interruptive prosopopeia. It

names the fact that no linguistic norm can be normal enough to reign sovereign, or abnormal enough to strip itself of any pretension to being paradigmatic. Language simultaneously exceeds and disappoints the expectations it arouses. ... This is why any individual anacoluthon seems to be both an instance of linguistic anarchy and a fully functional – even hyper-functional – formation.⁶³

Ironical interruptions within language are both a disturbance of language *and* its “normal” or proper functioning. Language is therefore “constitutively incapable of confirming its own pretensions to being a self-realising (auto-productive, auto-validating) system”.⁶⁴ Through irony language *is*, interrupted.

Derrida quotes a line from Henri Thomas’ novel *La Parjure*: “Just imagine, I was not thinking about it”. This line contains an imperative – “just imagine” – and what appears to be a constative statement, a description of fact – “I was not thinking about it”. However, “I was not thinking about it” is not simply an account of amnesia, it is also the performative act of a confession that “resembles an avowal that disculpates itself; thus, it also resembles a neutral description no less than a confession, a strange avowal of innocence, that of someone who, disavowing his avowal, in some way pleads guilty and not guilty at the same time” (WA 162-63). Thus the statement is performative and constative, and both (responsibly) confesses guilt while (irresponsibly) dismissing it. The statement anacoluthically interrupts itself, and “permits anyone to respond, in a manner that is at once responsible and irresponsible, as serious as it is insolent, undecided between provocative irony and disarming sincerity, perhaps in truth disarmed: ‘It’s true. Just imagine, I was not thinking about it’” (WA 167). The anacoluthon of the “I was not thinking about it”, the confession which is not a confession, is the permanent interruptive possibility of a disruption of thought, “a discontinuity, an interruptibility that is at bottom the very resource, the ambiguous power of the anacoluthon: the disappearing at work, a passive work, in the very essence of seeming, in the very phenomenality of appearing” (WA 191). The force of the anacoluthon, a force of irony, is a force that is not simply productive but also a force of disappearing, a force of non-work in the work.

⁶³ Mieszkowski, 654.

⁶⁴ Mieszkowski, 654.

The skewed performative/constative of perjury operates through the structure of the anacoluthon. When one lies one makes a new truth; the lie does not constatively describe a previously existent state, but falsely describes such that a new event/history is produced. When a subject perjures herself she doubles the lie as she lied about content *and* when she said she would not lie. Thus the time of perjury is always already divided. In a second moment betrayal can follow an authentic promise, or the seemingly genuine oath can from the first moment have always been a lie. “These two temporalities or these two structural phases seem after the fact to envelope one another. Hence the gulf of amnesia, the interruption, the possibility of anacoluthic discontinuity” (WA 173). Hence too the temporal instability of irony, perjury and the anacoluthon; it always takes place, whether one hears it or not, in the future perfect. As the sentence moves into the future it instigates a retrospective change in the past and renders what had seemed correct incorrect.

The disjunctive, ironic force of the anacoluthon interrupts linear, progressive temporality:

one who perjures himself or herself, can always seek to be excused, if not forgiven, by alleging ... the unsublatable thickness of time and of what it transforms, the multiplicity of times, instants, their essential discontinuity, the merciless interruption that time inscribes in “me” as it does everywhere. This is the ultimate resource, or even the fatality, of the anacoluthon. (WA 173)

The anacoluthon breaks continuous time or identity into a series of fragmentary, ironic moments, moments that conjoin in a potentially infinite number of ways to produce an anacoluthic allegory or narrative. In breaking time in this way the anacoluthon “has also done its work in things themselves, if one can say that, here in the ‘subjects of the action’, across and beyond the grammatical ‘I’” (WA 194). The “anacoluthon interrupts forever the relation to self, the possibility of a relation to self” (WA 196), or as J. Hillis Miller writes, “An anacoluthon in its self-contradiction cannot be taken as spoken by a single unitary mind”.⁶⁵ It splits the self, and is a mode of “language that cannot be returned to a single paternal, patronising logos or speaking source”.⁶⁶ It stems from irony – the “permanent possibility of disaster inherent in any narrative line and in the reader’s

⁶⁵ Miller, *Reading* 152.

⁶⁶ Miller, *Reading* 151.

interpretation of it”⁶⁷ – which Miller also terms “‘alogism,’ the absence of any ascertainable logos and the dissolution of the reader’s instinctive understanding of narrative according to certain categories of unitary consciousness”.⁶⁸

Fables of Irony⁶⁹

In “Psyche” Derrida presents a performative (re)invention of Francis Ponge’s “Fable” that, operating within rules and conventions, attempts to show a certain stretching of their limits, a certain *beyond within* them. This reading (re)invents Derrida’s text to turn the wheel of the machine a little closer to irony, and through interruption to produce a new event. “‘Fable,’ owing to a turn of syntax, is a sort of poetic performative that simultaneously *describes* and *carries out*, on the same line, its own generation” (PI 11). “Fable” produces an event through an anacoluthic interruption that introduces a “disparity or gap into the customary use of discourse, by upsetting to some extent the mind-set of expectation and reception that it nonetheless needs” (PI 24). The analysis of “Fable” that follows is in a sense subject to the same interruptive movement. While it is based on Derrida’s own reading, and on the irony and performativity posited thus far, it also prefigures the irony of the remainder of the thesis. It is a fable for the thesis, an “allegory of allegory” (PI 10) or, better put, an (ironic) allegory of irony.

“‘Fable’”, writes Derrida, is “an allegory stating ironically the truth of allegory that it is in the present, and doing so while stating it through a play of persons and masks” (PI 17). Thus, since Derrida follows de Man’s reading of allegory and irony from “The Rhetoric of Temporality”, and understands irony and allegory as specular inversions of each other, we are presented with an allegory that states the truth of allegory through or in the mirror (of irony), that is, that states an inversion of truth, a truth represented or performed. This “truth” is “a truth that is nothing other than its own truth producing itself” (PI 20), a truth produced through the mirror *and* through masks and play. “Fable” is a poem which breaks the mirror of (direct) self-reflexivity with the catachrestic specularity of irony, a skewed reflexivity which produces truth, and therefore

⁶⁷ Miller, *Reading* 156.

⁶⁸ Miller, *Reading* 149.

⁶⁹ See appendix i for full text and translation of “Fable”.

produces truth/fiction.⁷⁰ There is no face before the mirror, there is nothing that is *re-presented*, and therefore reflexivity as traditionally understood does not occur. The face is produced in the moment of description, a “reflection that produces the self of self-reflection by producing the event in the very act of recounting it. An infinitely rapid circulation – such are the *irony* and temporality of the text” (PI 12). This production does not result in absolute correspondence, a self-affecting performative, but a *perverformative* that produces across an interruptive delay or leap, an I producing an *I+excess*, that is, an *I+alterity*.⁷¹

“*[T]he first line states the truth*”, states the second line of “Fable”, a line whose own veracity is unconfirmed. Truth is a fabulous invention of language and narrative that is subject to deferral or displacement, (re)turning to a different line, a different place. The descriptive assurance of the second line of the poem is a constative operating as a delayed or retrospective performative in the first; re-promising or re-saying it. The *mise en abyme* of the second line functions as the temporally disruptive future perfect – the first line will have stated the truth – and thus in the hidden, analeptically revealed performativity a truth is performed as (potential) perjury. The two lines introduce a temporal disjunction; the stating of the truth is confirmed afterwards, by the second line, forcing a return to the first line in a movement of anacoluthic interruption. As the second line offers no guaranteed veracity, we are forced to undergo a potentially infinite interpretative loop, altering the past as necessary in line with the backward reinscription and production/destruction of anacoluthon or perjury.

The first sentence of the fable/poem/fabula contains “with” twice – “*With the word with begins then this text*” – but the doubling within the line does not merely stem from the twofold use. “With” is in fact doubled from the first instance. While in the first instance the word is supposedly used and in the second instance merely mentioned, the sentence cannot effectively begin until the second term arrives, and so what appears to be the inaugural event – the usage – is delayed and cannot begin at the beginning. Since it waits for the second(ary) and yet primary term to (not) begin, both terms exist undecidably between use and mention, and both become citations of an original term that never quite arrives. The beginning of the poem is doubled or divided by a description of the beginning,

⁷⁰ The mirror throughout is ironically interrupted by possible interpretations of specularity as *correspondence*, and specularity as *inversion*.

⁷¹ For more on this positing, which is the step/not of parabasis, see chapter four.

and is thereby a quotation of the non-inaugural.⁷² Thus we find the catachrestic *autopoiesis* of the contaminated performative/constative,

the singular structure of an event that seems to produce itself by speaking about itself, *by the act of speaking of itself* once it has begun to invent on the subject of invention, paving the way for it, inaugurating or signing its singularity, bringing it about, as it were; and all the while it is also naming and describing the generality of its genre. (PI 6-7)

“Fable” tells the truth/fiction of “the desperate effort of an unhappy speech to move beyond the specularity that it itself constitutes” (PI 9); to move to the other side of the mirror and *be* rather than represent. The tain of the mirror also represents our modes of separating language between use and mention, between contexts, between performative and constative. But language can’t be separated thus, and always crosses the hymen/hyphen that is the mirror. Hence irony, which Derrida describes as an infinitely rapid circulation, is the force of (dis)connection inducing the “infinitely rapid oscillation between the performative and the constative, between language and metalanguage, fiction and nonfiction, autoreference and heteroreference” (PI 13). Irony is the (impossible) movement across the mirror.

As the poem turns in on itself, and produces itself in a temporal loop, the metalinguistic, constative aspect of the poem is seen to be impossible, as it describes that which did not exist prior to the description. Fable’s impossible metalanguage is due to what Derrida, through de Man, calls the “temporal predicament” of irony and allegory. The alinear movement of irony is the temporality of “Fable”, which begins without beginning, and therefore splits or doubles its (non)inaugural movement. The name/description/genre mark “Fable” calls to “fabula”, a term denoting the order of events as they would have occurred in the “real” time of the fiction, a time fabricating authenticity from inauthenticity, a fiction of “natural” time produced and undone by the fiction. The temporal predicament which enables events to come before and after the other will be renamed in the fourth chapter as an ironic, fragmentary temporality, a force which introduces a paratactical exigency to time, making it fragmented and alinear.

A fable usually comprises a narrative followed by a short moral. In “Fable” the order is reversed – the first six lines of the poem present an exegesis/moral

⁷² See chapter four for ironic quotation.

which is followed by a narrative in a short ironic burst or fragment. The first six lines are an italicised commentary in the present tense, containing a declarative, an interrogative, an apostrophe and a final ellipsis, while the last two, whose reassuring roman typeface is undone by the capitalised “AFTER” and the isolation of parenthesis, present a descriptive narrative in the past. Thus the tenses of the section do not progress but regress, and the poem’s divided structure of first and last without middle stress an ironic, fragmentary temporality – the beginning as end and end as beginning – as the first section is an epilogue to the last, while the last section tells the story on which the first comments. Interrupting the simple tenses of the past and present is the haunting of the future perfect produced by the regressive movement of the second line: as in the grammar of the future perfect – and the movement of the anacoluthon or perjury – the sentence/act in the future changes the past, and the second line of the poem changes the first.

The isolation of the narrative, enclosed in the mirrored walls of the parenthesis, is revealed to be a perjury, as the mirror is splintered by the preceding exegesis, which fills the cracks with fissures. The narrative recounts the traditional story of bad luck and the breaking of a mirror, but here the order is reversed, as the mirror is broken, deliberately, following seven years of hardship. The final, eighth line of the poem in which the mirror is cracked is preceded by seven lines, one for each year of misfortune. For Derrida the misfortune is the distress of self-reflexivity, of presuming that there is an act of penetrative, final reading, and that categories are pure and uncontaminated. The poem is a work of mourning, but an ironic, melancholic mourning, as it takes place prior to the breaking of the mirror. The destruction of the mirror should not, however, be thought of as negative – in the poem misfortune is the *cause* not the *result* of the cracking of specularity. The broken mirror still reflects, but reflects with kaleidoscopic alterity and ends the obsession with the singular, centred subject and language.

In keeping with fragmented temporality, Derrida describes “Fable” as *contrapuntal* (PI 7), where (ironic) point plays against (ironic) point, where voices are independent, yet polyphonically inhabiting a shared space.⁷³ Line six mentions “our difficulties”, which expands to include the author, the speaker(s), the reader(s), and the fable itself. The first person singular/plural description, question and direct address changes into a third person omniscient narration for the last two

⁷³ He does, however, in this instance, associate a certain didactic element with counterpoint.

lines, outlining the actions of “she”. The anacoluthic interruption of voice is compounded by the plural address of the parabolic chorus that comments both on the creative difficulties of the work, and the difficulties of language in general. As the chorus steps up – as the personal “you” and the plural “our” are introduced – it fades off into the ellipsis and the *blanc* of parataxis. Shielded, separated, fragmented, the next sentence, across the absence of a conjunction, is the chorus’s step of the *antistrophe*, the step back across the stage, the response that turns to the third person and the narration of an inverted story.

Derrida names the female character of the allegorical story “Psyche”, and is then able to directly relate her to the end of “The Rhetoric of Temporality”, where de Man speaks of Eros and Psyche, two lovers who can never come fully into contact with each other. This passage is, according to Derrida, one which “points up the distance between the two ‘selves,’ the two my-selves, the impossibility of seeing oneself and touching oneself at the same time, the ‘permanent parabasis’ and the ‘allegory of irony’” (PI 18). The self-reflexivity of the poem is undone by irony; there is no referent which is present to itself, but a movement of reflexivity which inaugurates or invents, catachrestically producing self as other in the moment of description/performance, an “invention of the same and the other, of oneself as (of) the other” (PI 8-9).

“Fable” is a deconstructive invention, split between the discovery of what was already there, and the production of something new. It is a performance in relation to rules and conventions but also a disruptive event and disordering mechanism that spontaneously destabilises – it is an ironic performativity. It invents so that “To invent would then be to ‘know’ how to say ‘come’ and to answer the ‘come’ of the other” (PI 39). Its hybridity means that it is “a unique event; but it is also a machine and a general truth” (PI 20). Its mechanicity resists programming, but opens itself up to the aleatory without simply partaking of chaotic free play. It is an anagrammatical irony which produces an event of alterity which steps away from the reflexivity or narcissism of the self-present subject and language system. It ironically reflects, producing the other through a fragmented mirror and contaminated categories.

Dialogues of Irony: Socrates and Plato

Introduction

This chapter turns to Socratic and Platonic irony¹, and the question that resounds throughout “Plato’s Pharmacy”: “what can be said of irony here? What is its major sign?” (D 67) Against Plato’s mode of philosophy that reads to suppress alterity and the structural irony of language, Derrida demonstrates the ironic – parabolic and paratactic – structures of writing, inheritance, intention and origin. Socratic irony is understood as a mode of ironic questioning that steps very close to deconstruction, a process of reading/writing that works to reveal aporias and inconsistencies. Socrates is a hyphen, a paratactic *blanc*, a catalyst, an anacoluthic interruption. Platonic irony is a dramatic irony which attempts to dominate and manipulate that which can be wielded but never wholly reduced or controlled. Plato attempts to use irony to suppress irony, producing – accidentally? – the ironic author, an (in)visible figure of interruption. This chapter moves between Derrida’s primary texts on Plato – “Plato’s Pharmacy” (1972), “Khōra” (1993) and “Envois” (1980), while reading Plato’s dialogues and the work of classicists and philosophers on Platonic/Socratic irony.

The (Writing of the) Paratactic *Pharmakon*

Writing, according to the first ironic author – Plato – is bad because it is external, because it is the supplement of a supplement and relies on signs rather than the thing itself, “substituting the passive, mechanical ‘by-heart’ for the active reanimation of knowledge, for its reproduction in the present” (PP 108). Writing does not have an independent, positive identity, nor is it a separate order of signification in itself. It is weakened speech, “a living-dead, a reprieved corpse, a deferred life, a semblance of breath” (PP 143). It cannot produce anything new, it can only repeat, remind or recall, the copy of a copy, a soporific repetition that lulls memory to sleep and causes it to fade into forgetfulness. Thus writing moves

¹ The entirely false distinction between Socratic irony and Platonic has been retained, so that “Socratic irony” designates, in a rather naïve sense, the irony associated with Socrates as autonomous instigator of his own actions, while “Platonic irony” is restricted to the irony of the figure of the author and his methods of textual manipulation. This distinction is preserved to emphasise how this mode of irony differs from traditional theorisations.

towards “the domains of death, of nontruth, of nonknowledge” (PP 105), a force of absence containing both the death of the author’s meaning, and the death of the author herself. Without the parental authority that confirms the accuracy or inaccuracy of interpretations, writing is a ghost which “rolls (*kulindeitai*) this way and that like someone who has lost his way, who doesn’t know where he is going, having strayed from the correct path, the right direction” (PP 143). Writing is a son who is lost, weary and footsore, an orphan who committed parricide, who replaced the father with absence, repetition and death. So it wanders the streets, an outlaw, a vagrant, homeless and fatherless, muttering to itself, repeating itself, blankly uttering the same response to every question and every questioner.

The *pharmakon* is a metonym for (ironic) writing, a metonym that undoes itself, as *pharmakon* designates a general excess of the tropological, and the part becomes bigger than the whole. Derrida describes the *pharmakon*, which can signify “remedy”, “poison”, “drug”, “paint” and which is linked to “*pharmakeus*” (magician), and “*pharmakos*” (scapegoat), as an “ambivalent, indeterminate space ... that which in *logos* remains potency, potentiality, and is not yet the transparent language of knowledge” (PP 115). Writing as *pharmakon* – for Derrida an (ironic) *blanc* of potentiality, for Plato a blank of absence – stems from a section in the *Phaedrus* that requires only a brief paraphrase. As Socrates recounts, one day the god Thoth or Theuth presented his new inventions to the king of the gods, Thamus. Each was presented, and to each was given measured praise or censure. However, when Theuth presented writing, which he described as a *pharmakon* for memory and wisdom, Thamus’s condemnation was immediate. Writing, he said, was a *pharmakon* which would produce forgetfulness and idleness, as people would no longer need to actively or internally remember. Students would have only the appearance of wisdom, and would grow conceited and foolish. Thus the father passed judgement.

In this short passage Plato introduced a mode of reading of the either/or, a way of understanding the paratactic play of language that reduced it to a regulated game of semantics. Plato, Derrida argues, chose an ambiguous lexeme in order to found a tradition that reads by repressing plurality, adhering to “a logic that does not tolerate such passages between opposing senses of the same word, all the more since such a passage would reveal itself to be something quite different from simple confusion, alternation, or the dialectics of opposites” (PP 99). Thus, in

reading the above passage, the good Platonist knows that *here pharmakon* means poison, and *here* it means cure. A useful example of this reading can be found in an article by Albert Cook. Arguing against Derrida's reading of *pharmakon* and play, he writes that

[*pharmakon*] in the *Phaedrus*, each of the eight times it occurs, always means unambiguous "healing drug" rather than "poison". ... The fashionably resurrected neo-Frazerian term *φαρμακός* "scapegoat", can still less be applied to this text, or to Plato in general. The word does not occur once in all of Plato, and it does violence to much that he says to enlist it under the heading of this anthropological commonplace.²

Thus for Cook, inheriting in a direct line from Plato, context covers meaning, and the textual web of a signifier is wholly irrelevant.

Pharmakon names the ironic force within a system of differences that takes one off the systematic path of uncontaminated categories and transparent, closed contexts, so that "writing, the *pharmakon*, [is] the going or leading astray" (PP 71). The ironic force or strength of the *pharmakon* lies its weakness, in its lack of distinct, determinable limits. The space its non-identity opens is the space of the between, the paratactic gap/conjunction that operates as hyphenated potential, not determinable univocal knowledge. It is a substance or, like irony, an ant substance which "resists any philosopheme, indefinitely exceeding its bounds as nonidentity, nonessence, nonsubstance; granting philosophy by that very fact the inexhaustible adversity of what funds it and the infinite absence of what founds it" (PP 70). As Derrida writes, in a description very close to accounts of irony, "The 'essence' of the *pharmakon* lies in the way in which, having no stable essence, no 'proper' characteristics, it is not, in any sense (metaphysical, physical, chemical, alchemical) of the word, a *substance*. The *pharmakon* has no ideal identity" (PP 125-26). Nothing in itself, a hyphen, it endlessly promises and perjures, presenting a path of labyrinthine complexity, a textual chain that infinitely moves between a series of signifiers.

The *pharmakon* is not the result of the combination of two pure, heterogeneous terms, but is the agent of differentiation, "the [paratactic] medium in which opposites are opposed, the movement and the play that links them among themselves, reverses them or makes one side cross over into the other (soul/body,

² Albert Cook, "Dialectic, Irony, and Myth in Plato's *Phaedrus*", *The American Journal of Philology* 106.4 (1985) 427.

good/evil, inside/outside, memory/forgetfulness, speech/writing etc.)” (PP 127). This does not state that the *pharmakon* is an originary term or source, but that the *pharmakon* exemplifies the paratactic, parabolic functioning of the mark, which is riven by a force – irony – that resists propositional or univocal definition. The ambiguity of the mark leads to the decision to divide the world into binaries, but these binaries are always undone by the ironic force designated here by *pharmakon*. The *pharmakon* is a paratactic hyphen/gap that can be a plus or a minus, good or bad, inside or outside, and therefore precedes the determination of the sign as one or the other. It is the potentiality of the “difference of difference” (PP 127), the trope of tropes, the irony of irony, the force of external excess at the heart of the mark. Plato’s system of opposites is not parasitically attacked by the subsequent and external, but by a force of externality and temporal disjunction that is/was always already internal. The very possibility of thinking of oppositions like the internal and external is established by the ironic plurality of the mark, of the *pharmakon*, which, however, also renders uncontaminated oppositions wholly unattainable. Interestingly, to return to the parataxis/syntax distinction, in *Taking on the Tradition* Michael Naas argues against a reading dependent on syntactic relations.

To say straight-away that the meaning of *pharmakon* depends on its syntactical relation in the dialogue would already be, as Derrida shows, to accept the opposition between meaning and expression, signifieds and signifiers, where what is important would be what is *meant* and not what is *said*, what is *thought* and not what is *expressed*.³

Naas is correct; the term “syntax” does have far too strong an association with the finished product and style of an author, and therefore with the univocal truth or intention of the author. Hence parataxis.

Speech is conceptualised by Plato as a *writing* on the soul, a heuristic device which prompts Derrida to speak of the “stunning hand Plato has dealt himself” (PP 157). Writing is divided into good writing and bad writing, and *eidōs*, truth, *epistēmē*, dialectics, elenchus all designated *pharmaka* that are opposed to the *pharmakon* of the Sophists; the game of language confuses them but Plato carefully separates them. The paratactic play of irony is turned by Plato into a game secured by rules and regulations, supervised and safeguarded by the author,

³ Naas, *Tradition* 10.

ethics and politics. In the double use of writing Plato argues that either play and writing are nothing, and can be ignored, or they work in the benefit of truth and seriousness, and are redeemed, but also changed. So either they are nothing, or they are something, but when something, they are a wholly different something. Hence there is no real logical contradiction in Plato's work, just some excellent sleight of hand; irony used to suppress irony and alterity.⁴

Ironic Reading

The blank spaces of parataxis are not secret. But certain systems, certain syntaxes have left a legacy of myopia, and readers have inherited a blindness, an inability to see the force in the blanks. Derrida traces these problems of perception back to Plato's insistence on a mode of interpretation that translates potentiality into univocity and allows context and intention to restrict meaning. For Plato the spaces of parataxis – the passages of parabasis – should not open on to the web of (other) meanings of a term, but should be blocked by context and a concentration on authorial intention. For Plato authorial intention is prior to expression, and it is in the process of translation into language that ambiguity arises. Within language a re-translation should occur to counteract this ambiguity and redirect meaning back to the author. Thus a blindness to the paratactic movement of language is developed, and the spaces and hyphens in and between terms become invisible. Derrida's Plato created a direct way to read a text, but in so doing also created an indirect way, a hidden way, an ironic way. Hence the understanding of irony, or metaphor, or indirect, poetic modes of communication as subsequent or secondary to thetic, propositional, direct and contextualised discourses. And hence a need to read, or rewrite with irony, in a way that

discovers new chords, new concordances; [that] surprises them in minutely fashioned counterpoint, within a more secret organisation of themes, of names, of words. It unties a whole *sumplotē* patiently interlacing the arguments. What is magisterial about the demonstration affirms itself and effaces itself at once, with suppleness, irony, and discretion. (PP 67)

⁴ This repetition forms the nonoriginary origin of identity, as repetition is both the possibility of truth – the same and the stable that can be repeated – and its impossibility – it shows it to lack absolute singularity and unity. These forms of repetition cannot be separated, as “they repeat each other” (PP 169). Hence “What is is not what it is, identical and identical to itself, unique, unless it adds to itself the possibility of being repeated as such. And its identity is hollowed out by that addition, withdraws itself in the supplement that presents it” (PP 168).

An ironic reading sees the counterpoint, hears the meanings which beat a slightly different time, and does not attempt to ignore the anagrammatical potential of the lexemes. It reveals what we have been taught to see as hidden, trained to ignore as secret, and what, in its multiplicity, can never be made a stable object of knowledge.

However, regardless of Plato, there is always secrecy to the text: “A text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game” (PP 63). The plurality of parataxis, the potentiality of the hyphens and the spacing, makes it impossible to ever reach the end of the chain of meanings, and so every reading, no matter how subtle, sensitive or ironic, will be haunted by the trace of a different interpretation. Which, as Derrida writes, is the power of a text: “If a speech could be purely present, unveiled, naked, offered up in person in its truth, without the detours of a signifier foreign to it, if at the limit an undeferred *logos* were possible, it would not seduce anyone” (PP 71). There are always anagrammatical links that “can never be booked, in the *present*, into anything that could rigorously be called a perception” (PP 63). Univocal intention can never be made the centre or origin of a work – “the system”, Derrida writes, “is not primarily that of what someone *meant-to-say*” (PP 95). The mark, hyphenated by irony, has a certain inaccessibility of its own, as it never traces a path back to a single origin or intention. Thus, as Derrida explains, the “textual chain we must set in place is no longer simply ‘internal’ to Plato’s lexicon. ... In a word, we do not believe that there exists, in all rigor, a Platonic text, closed upon itself, complete with its inside and its outside” (PP 130).

In “Khōra” Derrida directly associates irony with this “structure without an indivisible origin” (K 119). In the *Timaeus* Plato writes a dialogue whereby “each narrative content ... becomes in its turn the content of a different tale. Each tale is thus the *receptacle* of another. There is nothing but receptacles of narrative receptacles, or narrative receptacles of receptacles” (K 117). Derrida describes this structure, where “scenes interlock in a series of receptacles without end and without bottom”, as a “*theatre of irony*” [emphasis added] (K 119). The effect of this ironic movement is to remove the certainty of a definite, signed and authorised origin that can be clearly attributed to a single source. As Derrida writes, “how can one isolate a thesis or a theme that could be attributed calmly to the ‘philosophy of Plato,’ indeed to *philosophy* as the Platonic thing? That would

be to misrecognise or violently deny the structure of the textual scene” (K 119). Irony is therefore exactly not of the categories of intention and expression, but of the *a priori* contamination of the expressed by excess.

The logical contradiction of *Phaedrus* – the written condemnation of writing – is mirrored in the *Timaeus*, as when Socrates insists we move away from the poetic and sophistic to the philosophical and the political, we receive the repetition of a tale told by young Critias, heard from old Critias, who recounted a conversation with Solon, a *poet* who told of a further conversation with an Egyptian priest. This

further excess of irony ... accentuates the dynamic tension between the thetic effect and the textual fiction, between on the one hand the “philosophy” or the “politics” which is here associated with him – contents of identifiable and transmissible meanings like the identity of a knowledge – and on the other hand a textual drift [*dérive*] which takes the form of a myth, in any event of a “saying” (*legomenon*), whose origin appears always undefined, pulled back, entrusted to a responsibility that is forever adjourned, without a fixed and determinable subject. From one telling to the next, the author gets farther and farther away. (K 123-24)

The contradiction between thesis and theme, the ironic incongruity – hyphenation – between content and archive pushes the stable origin back to a “threatened, bastard, hybrid” (K 126) non-originary origin.

The secretive, excessive theatre of irony is what we inherit – “One always inherits from a secret – which says ‘read me, will you ever be able to do so?’” (SM 18) “*To be*”, writes Derrida, “means ... to inherit” (SM 67). But, of course, “what characterises a heritage is first of all that one does not choose it; it is what violently elects us” (FW 3). Inheritance is “never natural, one may inherit more than once, in different places and at different times” (SM 211). Writing is the disorder of inheritance we once thought linear and simple: Plato inherits from Socrates, but also creates him. He inherits from one who is both his creator and his creation, and writes him and kills him. Derrida inherits from the son and the father, is rightful if reluctant heir of both irony and metaphysics, and in “Plato’s Pharmacy” he steps up to and away from those traditions. As Naas writes:

Anytime Derrida begins analysing the notions of reception or legacy within a particular text in the tradition, he ends up, because of the very necessity of taking on the tradition, performing and interrupting these

gestures in his own reading so as to make possible the coming of “another gesture,” one that is neither simply his nor the tradition’s.⁵

Derrida reads ironically, paratactically, reordering tradition and disrupting the “proper” so as to make welcome other steps and paths. Hence “Plato’s Pharmacy” is about (ironic) modes of reading/inheritance that turn towards a text “*without* immediately and irremediably receiving it as it was *meant* to be received, that is, the possibility of receiving it at the limits of a theory of intention”.⁶

In direct opposition to Derrida’s mode of reading/inheriting is the move towards a univocal truth found in Classical textual criticism, which has, as Martin West writes, “the immediate aims of ascertaining as exactly as possible what the authors wrote and defining areas of uncertainty”.⁷ Texts that are deemed to differ from the author’s original are seen as somehow soiled, and errors are seen as “readings of a secondary origin”,⁸ mistakes bringing impurity to the author’s work. These stains must be removed to uncover the “original, uncontaminated”⁹ source. Interpretation operates as does metaphor; one cleans away the stratification to return to presence and the “natural” meaning. The process of selecting the most viable variable is summarised by West as follows:

1. It must correspond in sense to what the author intended to say, so far as this can be determined from the context.
2. It must correspond in language, style, and any relevant technical points (meter, prose rhythm, avoidance of hiatus) to a way in which the author might naturally have expressed that sense.
3. ... it must be clear how the presumed original reading could have been corrupted into any different reading that is transmitted.¹⁰

Thus from knowledge of the author’s style, a presumption of authorial intent based on the context, and a mechanical awareness of how errors can arise the original text can be sought. Meaning, for those inheriting directly from the writings of Plato, is fixed and univocal and located in the author. This method of reading is reflected in the traditional understanding of Socratic irony.

⁵ Nass, *Tradition* xix.

⁶ Naas, *Tradition* 20.

⁷ Martin L. West, *Textual Criticism and Editorial Technique* (Stuttgart: B. G. Teubner, 1973) 8.

⁸ West 32.

⁹ West 36.

¹⁰ West 48.

Traditional Readings of Socratic Irony

Traditionally, Socratic irony is understood as a mode of speech which creates a disparity between what is expressed and what is expected or what is meant and what is said. In the course of what are referred to as the early or ironic dialogues Socrates pretends not to understand an argument, feigns lapses in memory, requests detailed explanations, humbles himself and lauds his interlocutor(s), some of whom believe his often excessive praise, others of whom deem it mockery. A characteristic example of this is found in the *Republic*:

Don't be too hard on us, Thrasymachus, for if Polemarchus and I [Socrates] made an error in our investigation, you should know that we did so unwillingly. ... Hence it's surely far more appropriate for us to be pitied by you clever people than to be given rough treatment. When he [Thrasymachus] heard that he gave a loud, sarcastic laugh. By Heracles, he said, that's just Socrates' usual irony. I knew, and I said to these people earlier, that you'd be unwilling to answer, you'd be ironical and do anything rather than give an answer. (*Rep* 337a)

Here Thrasymachus' presumption is clear – Socrates means the opposite of what he says. Meaning was temporarily destabilised but through a simple inversion a literal, authentic sense has been regained.

Socrates' ironic mode of engagement is typically invested with pedagogic aims, with examples primarily concentrating on Socrates' simulation of ignorance for the purpose of disabusing his interlocutor of false arrogance and awakening anamnestic (true, eidetic knowledge lost in the trauma of birth) knowledge in him.¹¹ Socratic irony is thus most commonly deemed to be a wholly metaphysical concept, a process for returning to truth, be it the univocal truth of the author or the greater, eidetic truth. While the majority of commentators are linked by their basic presumption of truth as axiomatic, and their assumption that irony is a linguistic stratagem that can be defused and returned to a univocal meaning, many have refined readings of Socratic irony beyond the simple inversion shown above. This section presents a selection of theorisations of Socratic irony, from the simple to the complex, the reverse to the conditional, all of which read irony from firmly within the Platonic legacy.

¹¹ With the exception of an exchange between Socrates and Diotima in the *Symposium* Socrates' interlocutors are all men, therefore the masculine third person is employed throughout this section.

Gregory Vlastos, the most renowned theorist of Socratic irony, understands it as an ethical tool: a mockery that humbles the arrogant, removes false knowledge and opens the way for the true learning of *anamnesis*. Socrates' behaviour is *maieutic*; he performs the actions of a midwife who induces the arrival of knowledge in another, and while the labour may at times be difficult, the goal is always the good and the true. Vlastos reinscribes irony as "pretending" – and although he acknowledges that the latter term contains the negative connotations of duping, concealing the truth, and altering reality, in an act of Platonic bracketing he ignores those. His Socrates pretends as a child plays, in an action "as innocent of intentional deceit as is a child's feigning that the play chips are money, as free from shamming as are honest games, though, unlike games, serious in its mockery ..., dead earnest in its playfulness".¹² While much of Socrates' irony, Vlastos argues, can be understood through a simple act of inversion as shown above – hence *simple irony* – in some cases the intended meaning is not so transparent. Socrates' denial of knowledge, for example, cannot be resolved so simply, and so Vlastos posits *complex irony*.

Complex irony describes a situation in which terms are affected by polysemy to a degree that prevents the context from enabling a quick or obvious resolution. As Vlastos writes: "in 'complex' irony what is said both is and isn't what is meant: its surface content is meant to be true in one sense and false in another."¹³ Vlastos is not positing a theory of contamination or simultaneous meaning, but argues that when a term is repeated each instance of the lexeme may signify a different signified. In other words, taking Socrates' denial of knowledge – I only know that I do not know – Socrates *knows* (common, everyday knowledge) that he *knows* (wisdom, definitional knowledge, anamnestic knowledge) nothing. Vlastos' argument is thus absolutely Platonic – while lexemes may signify multiple signifieds, in each instance they can be reduced to a univocal, uncontaminated meaning.

Two further forms of irony have been described by Iakovos Vasiliou: a conditional and reverse irony. *Conditional irony*

is expressed in a conditional, with the antecedent frequently explicit, but sometimes implicit though clear from the context. The irony lies in the fact

¹² Vlastos 29.

¹³ Vlastos 31.

that *if* the antecedent were true, then Socrates *would* really believe the consequent; however it is clear to the reader, though not always to the interlocutor, that Socrates believes that the antecedent is false, which therefore suggests that he believes the negation of the consequent.¹⁴

According to Vasiliou when Socrates praises his interlocutors and humbles himself, he does not simply mean the opposite of what he says, but is instead playing on the conditional and describing as fact a situation which is potentially true. *If* the arrogance of his interlocutors was justified, *if* their knowledge was the wisdom they deemed it to be, then Socrates' statements of humility would be the simple truth. In this reading of irony the presence of a stable truth is still extant as there is no question that Socrates deems his interlocutors foolish in their self-confidence. However, the truth does contain the trace of a potential truth-to-come, a reality in which Socrates' interlocutors have become wise.

While *reverse irony* is as context-saturated as simple, complex and conditional irony, locating "truth" in the intentions of the author, it is produced by the audience's reception. "In 'reverse irony' Socrates speaks candidly, with his intended meaning explicit, and yet his interlocutors understand him as speaking *eirônîkôs* in the Greek sense."¹⁵ Thus, for example, when in the *Apology* Socrates says "Be sure that if you kill the sort of man I say I am, you will not harm me more than you harm yourselves" (*Apol* 30c), he speaks no more than the truth, yet so unsuitable are these words as a defence that the jury presumes that Socrates is mocking them and the situation. Reverse irony has the potential to be deliberately manipulated, offsetting truth against a reception that cannot accept it to generate *aporia* and confusion, but can also result in accidental misinterpretation. While Vasiliou's "reverse irony" is one of the few (classicist) theories of irony to specifically allow irony to be produced by the reader, it too depends on a relatively simple inversion. It also ironically creates a *false* irony – truth still lies in the author's univocal meaning, irony is simply subsequently misapplied.

Further examples of "Platonic" readings of irony are found in Jill Gordon's "Against Vlastos on Complex Irony" who sees irony as "an incongruity between phenomena within a dramatic context".¹⁶ Again assuming that truth is embedded within context, passages are realised as ironic through a process of

¹⁴ Iakovos Vasiliou, "Conditional Irony in the Socratic Dialogues", *The Classical Quarterly* 49.2 (1999) 462.

¹⁵ Vasiliou, "Socrates' Reverse Irony", *The Classical Quarterly* 52.1 (2002) 223.

¹⁶ Jill Gordon "Against Vlastos on Complex Irony", *The Classical Quarterly* 46.1 (1996) 134.

unfolding: words that contradict or mock earlier pronouncements, showing boasts to be empty and arrogance unfounded, are seen as ironic as they cause an analeptic understanding of incongruity. This reading retains authority in the meaning of the author, and while it divides Plato's and Socrates' audience into those who understand the dramatic irony and those who do not, meaning is still Plato's, who masterfully designs dialogues that refer back and forward to a univocal meaning. Charles L. Griswold Jr. sees Socratic irony as a tension between "between the deeds and words ..., or between different views expressed by the same person",¹⁷ with meaning controlled by authorial intent. Thus the classicist interpretation of Socratic irony and its investigation into the works of Plato can be seen to inherit from Plato modes of justifying Plato. Logocentrism is upheld, truth inscribed in the voice of the father of the thought, intended meaning remains prior to its (mis)translation into (ironic) speech or writing and the passage between meanings is blocked.

For Paul Friedländer Socrates' irony lay in disjunction, in the rift between the expected and the expressed that was immediately exemplified by the beautiful interior which lay concealed beneath Socrates' ugly exterior. Socrates' body taught his interlocutors to continue to search for the truth beyond immediate appearances or impressions, and so, for Friedländer, "irony is the net of the great educator".¹⁸ Irony is the movement of "attraction and repulsion at the same time",¹⁹ a tension that conceals and reveals the truth. While Friedländer's formulation of Socratic irony presupposes a truth, his awareness of its potential to contaminate and mutate opposite poles is extremely interesting. As he writes regarding Socrates' relation to knowledge and ignorance:

Obviously he [Socrates] did have knowledge. ... But in particular, as he often said, he knew that he did not know anything. Thus knowledge turns into its opposite ... [and] ignorance turns back to an ultimate stage of wisdom. For the ignorance revealed in the dialectical process was grounded in the living experience of the unknown.²⁰

Rather than Vlastos's very Platonic drive to specify and separate forms of knowledge, Friedländer notes how irony causes knowledge and ignorance to

¹⁷ Charles L. Griswold Jr. "Irony in the Platonic Dialogues", *Philosophy and Literature* 26 (2002) 88.

¹⁸ Paul Friedländer, *Plato*, trans. Hans Meyerhoff (London: Routledge, 1958) 141.

¹⁹ Friedländer 142.

²⁰ Friedländer 144.

become mutually contaminated. Irony does not dissolve differences to the point of rendering ignorance and knowledge indistinguishable, but it does reveal the complicity and proximity of supposedly distinct and distant poles. As Friedländer concludes, “Socratic irony, at its centre, expresses the tension between ignorance – that is, the impossibility ultimately to put into words ‘what justice is’ – and the direct experience of the unknown, the existence of the just man, whom justice raises to the level of the divine”.²¹

The Paratactic Irony of Socrates

This section does not outline Plato’s “intentions” surrounding his (re)presentation of Socratic irony, but looks at how irony functions in and through the character of Socrates in the early/middle dialogues. Socratic examination – *elenchus* – is read as an ironic dialogue/monologue that does not seek propositional knowledge but inhabits the movement and force of parataxis to step away from falsely held presumptions of wisdom. His examination is a questioning that leads to aporia, but parabolic aporia; a new step in a different direction. Socratic irony is a skewed mode of reflexivity, a process and a contamination of the inside and the outside as irony – and Socrates – functions as a paratactic hyphen, an anacoluthic interruption of argument and identity.

Socrates’ *elenchus* took the form of a series of questions, and sometimes answers, that scrutinised statements made by those who claimed to possess expert knowledge on a particular subject. The Socratic dialogues typically progress from a confident yet simplistic statement made by one of Socrates’ interlocutors, to the demonstration of the insufficiency and contradiction in the statements given and to an eventual impasse or aporia. The purpose of Socrates’ sometimes harsh engagement with speakers was to awaken the knowledge of *anamnesis*, the immortal, universal knowledge that the soul possesses but forgot in the shock of birth. Before this knowledge can be awakened, however, the undeserved and unjustifiable conceptions of personal wisdom held by the interlocutors had to be eradicated. *Elenchus*, under the guise of the search for truth, was thus a moral tool of revealing ignorance: it is better to correctly know you do not know than falsely think you do.

²¹ Friedländer 153.

Socrates: At first he [Meno's slave] did not know what the basic line of the eight-foot square was; even now he does not yet know, but then he thought he knew, and answered confidently as if he did know, and he did not think himself at a loss, but now he does think himself at a loss, and as he does not know, neither does he think he knows. ... So he is now in a better position with regard to the matter he does not know?

Meno: I agree with that. (*Meno* 84a-b)

The end of the dialogues in *aporia* is often seen as a failure, be it the failure of language, the failure of our modes of conceptualisation or the failure of the dialectic form as practiced by Socrates. However, in *Dialectic and Dialogue* Francisco Gonzalez argues that the *aporia* reached is in fact positive and constructive, but that to understand this one must realise that the knowledge that interests Socrates is in fact *nonpropositional*. Socrates is seeking a knowledge of essences which can never be encapsulated in propositional statements, as such statements describe an object's true predicates. What Socrates analyses are not objects of knowledge. As Gonzalez writes, "[Socrates'] method is one exposed to risk and danger, aware that the truth is as elusive as the contingencies of battle and can never be mastered through rules or definitions".²² He argues that Socrates does not attempt to substitute a definition for an essence; Socrates asks for definitional knowledge only because his interlocutors claim to have it, he does not presume that the Forms can be contained by a formulaic description. Hence *elenchus* does not strive for a definite end, but is a *process* of enlightening, and this process is an end in itself. It does not replace the experience of truth, beauty or virtue with a definition, but attempts to show that in our confused familiarity we have glimpses of truth. Thus the insight attained by the dialectic "is not a final answer that would render further discussion superfluous. It rather motivates and nourishes renewed questioning".²³

Derrida paints Socrates as a "master of the *pharmakon*" (PP 117).²⁴ He has the face of a magician, and is a "being that no 'logic' can confine within a noncontradictory definition" (PP 117). As a magician he works his magic through the *logos* without the aid of an instrument, an unaccompanied voice whose penetration one cannot escape. What Derrida calls the Socratic *pharmakon* –

²² Francisco J. Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue: Plato's Practice of Philosophical Inquiry* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1998) 37.

²³ Gonzalez 61.

²⁴ Interestingly, Kierkegaard describes Socratic irony in the sense of *pharmakon*, as he writes that it is "a healthiness insofar as it rescues the soul from the snares of relativity ... a sickness insofar as it is unable to tolerate the absolute except in the form of nothingness" (113-14).

Socratic irony – operates like a venom which penetrates the interior, inducing mania or paralysis.

Irony does not consist in the dissolution of a sophistic charm or in the dismantling of an occult substance or power through analysis and questioning. It does not consist in undoing the charlatanesque confidence of a *pharmakeus* from the vantage point of some obstinate instance of transparent reason or innocent *logos*. Socratic irony precipitates out of one *pharmakon* by bringing it into contact with another *pharmakon*. Or rather, it reverses the *pharmakon*'s powers and turns its surface over – thus taking effect, being recorded and dated, in the act of classing the *pharmakon*, through the fact that the *pharmakon* properly consists in a certain inconsistency, a certain impropriety, this non-identity-with-itself always allowing it to be turned against itself. (PP 119)

Socratic irony, as Derrida understands, it is not a literary ploy or piece of poetic excess that can be dissected or undone through an analysis that unlocks the hidden meaning. Socratic irony is what occurs when *pharmaka* come into contact, that is, when the hyphenated mark is conjoined, through interruption, with another mark. Socratic questioning – elenchus – and the resultant aporias are due to the divided, improper structure of the mark: when brought together marks result in hyphenated excess, when alone they remain in hyphenated excess with themselves. As Derrida describes Socrates in *Of Hospitality*, “Socrates [is] the disturbing man of question and irony (which is to say, of question, another meaning of the word ‘irony’), the man of the midwifely question” (OH 13). *Irony is elenchus*, irony is the permanent process of questioning, the path to and from aporia. Like deconstruction, elenchus reveals the inconsistencies and improprieties of structures and concepts thought to be worthy of their name.

According to Gonzalez Socrates does not seek definitional knowledge, but rather the opposite; he attempts to demonstrate the impossibility of propositional knowledge, as learning is not static and does not end. It could be argued that the term “Socratic method” is a misnomer, as the method is a nonmethod, a singular approach to a particular situation and person. What Socrates seeks is to respond and engage to a singular situation. *Socrates' irony is a form of deconstruction, an ironic engagement with a text*. While his life might be a “game of irony” (*Symp* 216e) it is not, as his fellow debaters have complained, simply a word game: “Tell me Socrates, aren't you ashamed, at your age, of trying to catch people's words and of making hay out of someone's tripping on a phrase?” (*Gorg* 489c). While

Socrates purportedly seeks the truth, that is, seeks a universal element to the virtues he discusses, the way in which his nonmethod functions, and the aporias at which his dialogues arrive, does not signal a univocal truth. He insists that speakers speak their mind, and speak what they believe to be true – which is a request for a univocal, authorial truth – but invariably shows that these truths are confused and plural, that the interlocutors are not quite sure what they intend. Meaning is never simply univocal; it takes Socrates very few questions for this to be revealed.²⁵

Socrates' own position within the elenctic nonmethod is ambiguous and veiled. When the speakers become frustrated Socrates' repeated defence is that he simply pursues the truth, and that "the lover of inquiry must follow his beloved wherever it may lead him" (*Euth* 14c). Socrates, as he claims, follows the steps of an argument as dictated by the holder of knowledge; it is the argument that lays itself out in front of him, Socrates merely walks in its path. Socrates' (seemingly) leading questions do not lead to a pre-conceived contradiction but, following the route laid out by the interlocutor, arrive at an impasse generally if not specifically predicted by Socrates. In other words, Socrates knows that the dialogue will end inconclusively, but he neither knows nor foresees the specific inconsistency on which the dialectic will get stuck. As he says in *Euthyphro*:

When you say this, will you be surprised if your arguments seem to move about instead of staying put? And will you accuse me of being Daedalus who makes them move, though you yourself are more skilful than Daedalus and make them go round in a circle? (*Euth* 15b-c)

Socrates' role in the dialogues is therefore not directly active but reflexive; he presents the speakers' own arguments to themselves, inverted, different, from an other place. When speakers converse with Socrates they see their own thoughts and words in mirror image; exactly as they are but from a different perspective and a slightly different place. This distance pushes their argument forward, and so they present/agree to the next step of their proposition. Socrates is a mirror, an other through which the self can be viewed, but a reflection that never shows what the subject is used to seeing or expects to see. Socrates does not specifically forward a different argument, but re-presents the interlocutor's own argument to

²⁵ This is not to say that Socrates believed in the absence of an "eidetic" truth, but in a truth which exceeds propositional statements.

himself, revealing its inconsistencies and contradictions: “give your attention”, Socrates says, “to the argument itself to see what the result of its refutation will be” (*Char* 166e).²⁶ In other words: look to yourself, says Socrates, look at yourself. The early dialogues are not in fact dialogues but *monologues*, and the interlocutor shadow-boxes with his own argument, speaking with the self through the mirror of the other until his knowledge begins to dissolve. Voluble and verbose, Socrates is a deafening silence, one who operates on the borders of the inside and the outside; he is the *pharmakon* who is outside and other, of indefinite identity, and yet who penetrates the speaker to reveal himself to himself. Socrates, as he describes himself, is “an empty jar” (*Phae* 235d), a blank sheet, glass with a silver backing, a space to be filled by the other, who sees himself through alterity. Socrates is a *blanc*, an interruptive space that nonetheless gives room to the interlocutor. *Socrates is the hyphenated space of paratactic irony*. Socrates, argues Blanchot, *lived* as permanent parabasis. His life was anacoluthic interruption: “Questioning, he interrupts and interrupts himself without cease, giving form ironically to the fragmentary” (ED 65).

Socrates’ role in the dialogues/monologues is the performance of an anacoluthon. The exchanges are constantly interrupted by the undecidability of his position; he leads and follows, he is active and passive, responsive and dictatorial, inside and outside, present and absent. He throws both the interlocutor and the reader into confusion as he operates on the borders of categories but always steps so as to turn the debater in on himself. As Alcibiades describes him he is the anacoluthon that is a Silenus. All his signs and codes point to one thing, a poor, fat, ugly man who loiters in the market place lusting after young boys and presenting arguments “clothed in words as coarse as the hides worn by the most vulgar satyrs” (*Symp* 221e). And yet at the same time he is a sober and temperate man, full of the beautiful and godlike. He is interruption, a contamination and confusion of discourses, vulgar and refined, wise and foolish, ugly and beautiful, a transgression between categories. As Kierkegaard writes, “The outer and the inner

²⁶ This is true of the early dialogues; the later dialogues, in which Socrates makes longer speeches, tend to proffer a firmer argument. This is one of the more concrete reasons why these dialogues are understood to present Plato’s philosophy rather than Socrates’ (non)method.

did not form a harmonious unity, for the outer was in opposition to the inner, and only through this refracted angle is he [Socrates] to be apprehended”.²⁷

Socrates is the personification of parataxis, an ironic sign of interruption and penetration that can move in any direction. His language operates as parataxis, phrases – his denial of teaching, his denial of knowledge – that point to any number of meanings. His is a (parabolic) step that both leads and follows, or perhaps more accurately, that follows on the path the argument dictates (once given a little push). He is a catalyst, a midwife causing others to give birth to themselves, to reorder themselves. In the *Apology* Socrates states that “Throughout my life, in any public activity I have engaged in, I am the same man as I am in private life” (*Apol* 33a) – what is the same for Socrates is his difference, his place at the centre that lies on the edge, the parabolic movement of the *pharmakon*. His is the irony that reveals that words, arguments, and subjects are ordered on a transgressive movement of disorder, that destabilises inside and outside, monologue and dialogue. His is an irony that hyphenates.

The ironic movement of Socrates is never a superior vantage point – he is neither external nor elevated but an internal/external mirror presenting a skewed parabolic reflexivity. The subject sees his argument, and self, reflected through a disjointed reflexivity of anacoluthic interruption, one that presents a different self, an interrupted self. Which is not to claim that the dialogues successfully change the speakers; most interlocutors show little direct evidence of personal revelations. As Alcibiades says: “the moment I leave his side, I go back to my old ways” (*Symp* 216b). What Socrates’ irony does is to turn the subject – person and theme – in on itself, and bring it to a point of interruption. As Derrida writes, “the Socratic *pharmakon* petrifies and vivifies, anesthetises and sensitises, appeases and anguishes” (PP 119n). Its aporia, however, is never a dead end, but a new path. As a mixture of two heterogeneous terms, the *pharmakon* is always a blend and an impurity, so that even “the good remedy, Socratic irony, comes to disturb the intestinal organisation of self-complacency” (PP 128). Its adulterated, contaminated status enables it to function inside and outside, as an internal mirror of alterity.

²⁷ Kierkegaard 50. In *Atmosphäre: Essays zur neuen Ästhetik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1995) Gernot Böhme argues that the figure of Socrates introduced the concept of disjunction between the inner and the outer self.

In “*Khōra*” Derrida describes Socrates in relation to *khōra*, the third genus which “names neither this nor that, [nor] says this and that” (K 89). *Khōra* defies the logic of noncontradiction, and is that which “while *giving place* to that opposition as to so many others, seems sometimes to be itself no longer subject to the law of the very thing which it *situates*” (K 90). *Khōra* seems to somehow reverse the metaphorical tenor/vehicle modality, as the heuristic devices – mother, receptacle, imprint-bearer, nurse – used to explain it actually grow solid themselves. *Khōra* is a support or a subject which gives place, rather than taking place, a non-place never exactly or appropriately named. In the *Timaeus* the sophists are described as those who are outside, who roam, homeless, while the politicians and philosophers are inside, placed and positioned. Socrates’ strategy operates from a non-place, as he says he resembles the poets. As Derrida writes,

If Socrates pretends to include himself among those whose *genus* is to have no place, he does not assimilate himself to them, he says he resembles them. Hence he holds himself in a third genus, in a way, neither that of the sophists, poets and other imitators (*of whom he speaks*), nor that of the philosopher-politicians (*to whom he speaks*, proposing only to listen to them). ... His speech *occurs* in a third genus and in the neutral space or place without place, a place where everything is marked but which would be “in itself” unmarked. Doesn’t he resemble what others, later, those very ones to whom he gives the word, will call *khōra*? (K 109)

Socrates is a “*receptive addressee* ... a receptacle of all that will henceforth be described” (K 110). He puts himself in the place of *khōra*, in an “Irreplaceable and unplaceable place from which he receives the word(s) of those before whom he effaces himself but who receive them from him, for it is he who makes them talk like this. And us too, implacably” (K 111). Socrates isn’t *khōra*, but he resembles her/it, whatever she/it is. It is the neutrality of Socrates, his speaking from inside and outside, that makes him the master of the *pharmakon*, the master of irony.

Platonic Irony

Friedländer writes that “It is quite certain ... that one cannot approach Plato without taking into account what irony is and what it means in his work”.²⁸ Jean Paul writes that Plato’s irony

could, if there is such a thing as world humour, be called world irony, singing and hovering playfully not only over human errors (as humour hovers not only over human folly), but over all human knowledge, free as a flame that devours, delights, moves with ease, yet aspires only toward heaven.²⁹

Platonic irony is usually understood as a dramatic or authorial irony, an irony of form, and Plato portrayed as an author deliberately introducing complication and confusion into his work for reasons of pedagogy, play or power. While Alexander Nehamas, as we will see below, presents a dark and deceitful Plato, critics like John Seery deem Platonic irony a tool for teaching, for continuing Socrates’ exhortations to live an examined life. Should Plato present his ideal in a way that becomes easy to follow, the reader will simply and thoughtlessly follow his directions, and learn nothing more than how to emulate. Seery’s Plato instead invites the reader “to question the text itself, to think beyond it, and ultimately choose a path of justice independently”.³⁰ This section argues that regardless of Plato’s intentions in using irony – which appear to be the ironic use of irony in order to suppress irony – he is exemplary of the ironic author who produces and interrupts, who creates a work as process, who writes a *blanc* text of hyphens and abysses.

Plato’s irony is for Friedländer more complex and subtle than Socrates’; it is “a guide on the path to the eternal forms and to that which is beyond being”.³¹ Plato uses Socrates as form, as the figure of an “*ironic division*” who/which anacoluthically interrupts each scene. In the *Symposium* Plato has Socrates use Diotima to express certain views on love, so that Socrates is split into the priestess who is privy to the highest secrets, and one who represents the striving for truth in one who is ignorant. Hence the

²⁸ Friedländer 137.

²⁹ As quoted in Friedländer 137.

³⁰ John Evan Seery *Political Returns: Irony in Politics and Theory from Plato to the Anti-Nuclear Movement* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990) 140.

³¹ Friedländer 153.

ironic tensions between him [Socrates] and the others are superseded, at the crucial point, by an ironic tension between the seeker for truth and a power that, though shining through him, is also above him. ... Thus the ladder of ironic tensions raises the reader to the divination of a higher being and leaves behind the impulse of unceasing search for what he has divined. It excites, to speak with Friedrich Schlegel, a feeling of the insoluble opposition between the unconditional and the conditional.³²

The ironic split within the character of Socrates is mirrored in the interruption that takes place in the “*ironic shift of balance* in a work of art”.³³ What appears to be the theme of a dialogue is not quite the theme, and what appeared to be secondary is, if not primary, so involved with the primary as to render one impossible without the other. As Friedländer writes:

Just as there are pictures in which the pictorial centre remains vacant, and the centre of attention is transferred by the arrangement of lines, colours, and light effect to one of the corners, so the dialogue, if seen as a whole, confers essential meaning on that which appeared only as a means; and this meaning, in turn, illuminates and deepens even that which, as long as we did not recognise this ironic shift, appeared to be its primary purpose.³⁴

Form and content both support and disrupt each other, so that each piece is an anacoluthon turning around the ironic anacoluthon that is Socrates himself. Plato created a character who is a hyphen, who ironically interrupts and disrupts, who alters each dialogue’s theme and focus.

In *The Art of Living* Alexander Nehamas envisions a Plato “whose disdain for people is matched only by his passion for improving them”,³⁵ who

uses Socratic irony as a means for lulling the dialogue’s readers into the very self-complacency it makes them denounce. It [Plato’s irony] is deep, dark, disdainful. It is at least as arrogant a challenge to Plato’s readers as Socrates’ irony was to his interlocutors and perhaps even more so.³⁶

³² Friedländer 150.

³³ Friedländer 150.

³⁴ Friedländer 151.

³⁵ Nehamas 48. Interestingly, Nehamas uses “permanent parabasis”, writing: “Socrates’ irony towards Plato results in such a permanent parabasis: it makes it hard to remember that the figure who addresses his interlocutors and, by implication, the dialogues’ readers is a literary character in the first place” (92-93). Permanent parabasis becomes here just a cunning mode of inducing empathy in the reader.

³⁶ Nehamas 44.

Plato peoples his texts with arrogant innocents, and encourages his readers to adopt a “superior, ironic attitude towards Socrates’ dialectical partners. And in so doing, he turns us into arrogant innocents like them. As we treat Socrates’ victims ironically, unaware of our own misplaced confidence, we become ourselves the objects of Plato’s own, higher-order irony”.³⁷

For Christopher Rowe irony is “a form of expression which, when taken with its context, tends to undermine itself”,³⁸ a mode of discourse in which the serious and the playful interrupt each other. A single phrase or image can have both a philosophical content and a content that says something quite different, and irony is thus the mutual contamination of two different modes of discourse. As close to anacoluthic irony as this is, it is problematised by Rowe’s insistence on the separation of the serious and the ironic, and by his need to differentiate between parts of the discourse which are ironic, and parts which are not. The complicity between codes that occurs in irony is restricted to sections of indirect discourse, and eradicated from others where, Rowe intimates, a single, direct or literal meaning remains extant. Sometimes then, there is a double meaning, but at others there is most definitely not. Rowe positions himself strongly against a reading which states that “because Plato describes writing as play, and because irony is, or can be, a form of play, this by itself gives support to the view that the *whole* of his output is somehow ironical”.³⁹ Irony for Rowe is a device devoted to obstructing or concealing a direct meaning, one that can be used for positive or pedagogic purposes, but which is nonetheless a contrivance of the author as opposed to a basic effect of language.

Rowe’s platonic irony is specifically a “self-directed, or self-disparaging, irony”⁴⁰ that “serves to deflate the pretensions of the author himself – pretensions that are implicit in the very act of writing”.⁴¹ Works are playful because they are insufficient, as “reality is something which ultimately eludes verbal expression”.⁴² A writer uses irony as a warning, to show that the performance is a performance. Hence

³⁷ Nehamas 48.

³⁸ Christopher Rowe, “Platonic Irony”, *Nova Tellus* 5 (1987) 95.

³⁹ Rowe 86.

⁴⁰ Rowe 101.

⁴¹ Rowe 89.

⁴² Rowe 101.

the ironic playfulness of the *Phaedrus* is consistent with the attitude of a writer who says that writing is, after all, a kind of play, and that real intellectual advance is to be made by other means. Irony, we should again notice, is peculiarly adapted to the lesson which is to be taught – that books are not all that they seem to be.⁴³

Thus while irony is the mixing of codes and the contamination of discourses, it is used to reveal the inadequacy of a particular form, and should be recognised and thereby diffused. Rowe's Plato is a humble man, deliberately inserting paradoxes and contradictions in order to negate an impious appearance of wisdom. Yet Rowe still indirectly states that while the surface content of Plato's work should be mistrusted, it nonetheless forwards a concealed, univocal, intended truth. The puppet-master may play with the form, but he is still, for Rowe, pulling the strings to create the appearance of humility.

Derrida's formulation of Platonic irony has already been addressed, if not directly named. What Derrida refers to as "stunning hand Plato has dealt himself" (PP 157), Plato's concession that language is playful followed by the immediate reinscription of that play as a controlled game, is irony. But an irony used to control irony, to insist on a univocal truth. As Derrida writes,

This authority of truth, of dialectics, of seriousness, of presence, will not be gainsaid at the close of this admirable movement, when Plato, after having in a sense reappropriated writing, pushes his irony – and his seriousness – to the point of rehabilitating a certain form of play. (PP 154)

Plato's irony is the suppression of the ironic movement of language, an irony that attempts to change parataxis into syntax, into a rhythm and rule proposed by the author. It is an irony that ironically undoes itself, an irony anacoluthically interrupted. It ironically makes irony a dramatic device to be used and manipulated, rather than a functioning of the mark. His is a serious irony, an irony of contaminated opposites, where play becomes serious, and although he attempts to hide it, the serious can also become play. It is the ultimate ironic card trick, the sleight of hand that flips irony into univocity, that turns it over only to conceal it.

Plato created a mode of reading that turned parataxis into strict context, into an ordered movement secured by the full presence of a univocal meaning because, as Derrida speaks for him, "One ought to distinguish, between two

⁴³ Rowe 96.

repetitions” (PP 170). The ironic, paratactic *pharmakon* allows repetition to remain, but to remain in contamination. “Plato’s Pharmacy” ends as Derrida describes knocks at Plato’s door, two knocks, four knocks, traits, strokes or strikes that are inside and outside, that repeat the sound of his words hitting the rafters, and also signal the approach of the new, the other, the unconfined. But, as Derrida writes, “maybe it’s just a residue, a dream, a bit of dream left over, an echo of the night ... that other theatre, those knocks from without” (PP 171). It’s hard not to hear in this line the repetition of the theatre of irony that Derrida outlines in “Khōra”, the theatre that disrupts the author’s system, and contaminates repetitions. As Plato works in his pharmacy, mixing and separating, Derrida describes how the repetition of what has here been called parataxis causes his monologue to reverberate, so that it becomes a polylogue, or, as Plato’s works are named, a dialogue. The monologue is parataxis reordered into a dialectic as

words come apart, bits and pieces of sentences are separated, disarticulated parts begin to circle through corridors, become fixed for a round or two, translate each other, become rejoined, bounce off each other, contradict each other, make trouble, tell on each other, come back like answers, *organise their exchanges*, protect each other, *institute an internal commerce, take themselves for a dialogue*. Full of meaning. A whole story. An entire history. All of philosophy. [emphasis added] (PP 169)

Plato’s system is one that ironically interrupts itself, so that its repetitions and reverberations are repressed and reduced to univocal meaning.

Derrida compares Socrates to a *pharmakos*, a scapegoat, someone who exists inside and outside the city, whose death protects the city from the harm lying in wait.⁴⁴ If Socrates plays the role of the scapegoat for Athens, he also plays the role of scapegoat in Plato, an unpredictable impurity penetrating the inside of the text. One could suggest that Plato, in a slightly different way, plays the role of scapegoat in Derrida’s texts. Plato is both inside and outside all of Derrida’s works, a source of discomfort and irritation, a presence insisting on presence, dictating inescapable legacies of metaphysics. Derrida attempts to kill Plato; he seeks to replace the authoritative voice and presence of the father with absence. What Derrida removes Plato in order to protect, however, is not the pure and

⁴⁴ Interestingly, as noted in the introduction, Northrop Frye noted the similarities between irony and the *pharmakos*. While Frye describes the scapegoat as one who is neither innocent nor guilty, his outline actually presents one who is *both* innocent and guilty, despite his insistences that the categories are uncontaminated.

sacrosanct but the contaminated and the paratactic, and therefore Derrida's drive against Plato can of necessity never succeed. The movement between Plato and Derrida is itself an anacoluthic, paratactic reordering, an ironisation of metaphysics, an interaction of the step/not.

Regardless of Plato's intentions, this chapter argues that what Plato has produced in the dialogues is the figure of the ironic author. The ironic author is not simply masked or hidden, she is an anacoluthon, a permanent parabasis, an interruption and transgression. Plato wrote in a manner than confused the poet and the scribe, as he both created a character and transcribed the words of a friend/father. He wrote therefore fact and fiction, true accounts that could not possible be true to the letter, as he and his characters would then be possessed of superhuman memories. He is both character and author, although his presence as a character is marked by absence; he mentions himself by name only twice in the dialogues, once in the *Apology* (38b) and once in the *Phaedo* (59b), although the latter is to state his absence. He ostensibly writes to praise and honour Socrates, and yet his works seem to list the failures of an extremely exasperating individual. He conflates and confuses his own theories and opinions with those of Socrates, while leaving hints that the more complex and sophisticated are his own. He writes while condemning writing, lamenting its inadequacies while weaving beautiful prose and memorable speeches. He is humble, downplaying the author's role to near invisibility, and arrogant, as he devises a mode of reading that makes the author's light the only one to read by. He insists on truth, unity and univocal meaning, while employing a form that disguises or rebels against all three.

The dialectic is lauded as the only form of philosophical inquiry, and yet its fate appears, in the early "Socratic" dialogues at least, to be doomed to failure. Plato argues against the emotive tricks of the sophists and the poets, but plays heavily on the senses himself. He deliberately employs dramatic devices – in the *Phaedrus* everything takes place outside the city walls in the place of the other, faces are covered and speeches born from under the cloak of surrogate fathers. In the *Phaedrus* words are serious and playful, writing is wholly other to speech and yet its brother, is dangerous and yet a valuable metaphorical or heuristic device. The reader, as a reader of the base and illegitimate form of writing, is portrayed as passive *and* potentially both dangerous *and* vulnerable to the text, and yet is presented with a range of complexities that demand active engagement. This both

protects the text, as the less able reader will not read it, and increases the potential damage done to and by the text. The reader is the interlocutor *and* Socrates *and* Plato, required to accept, as false as the distinctions are, the universal philosophical truth *and* the particular, singular, literary truth of each dialogue. Plato's works are as voluble and as silent as Socrates, and Plato equally, if differently, garrulous and reserved.

Plato's work and Plato himself is an absolute anacoluthon, the ironic writer extraordinaire, who interrupts his own codes, who transgresses his own path. His texts paratactically reorder themselves, and yet give, as we have become accustomed to read parataxis, the appearance of order and linearity. He is the writer of irony who both produced and interrupted irony, who revealed the ironic, anacoluthic potential of language and instantly suppressed it. He presented his readers with fire and taught them to see it as a matchstick. From Plato and Socrates we receive ironic doubles, ironic masks, ironic concealment, and the basic sense of incongruity that is termed irony. And yet with commendable aplomb and a perfect sense of irony, Plato immediately restricts and controls it, until it is hidden and localised and dependent on the author's whim and truth. From Plato we ironically inherit, indirectly, hidden meanings and secret ironies.

Why Plato wrote this way has been addressed by many theorists, four of whom are listed above. On the whole I agree with their – and Derrida's – basic common thread, namely that Plato, aware of the insufficiencies of writing, wrote to keep the dialectical exchange as alive as possible, to keep the reader as active as possible, to keep the memory and the mind as engaged and challenged as possible. Of course, this aim is taken in two different directions, as most classicists say that Plato wrote with irony in order to teach or breathe life into the dead logos that is writing, while Derrida argues that Plato wrote this way in order to link writing back to the words of the author.⁴⁵ Regardless of Plato's aims, one cannot understand irony as a device that presents a solvable puzzle, a concealing veil laid over an already existent and independent truth. Which, to insert a proviso, does not state that there is no answer, that authorial intention is wholly irrelevant, or that each text presents an unfathomable jumble of words. Authorial intention is interesting, important and worthy of study, it is simply that irony prevents it from

⁴⁵ Of course, these different directions are also the same, as the life breathed into the text may be the potential to live beyond the author, but is usually taken as life from the author, that is, to be traced back to the author.

ever attaining the primacy of being the only possible reading of a text. Irony operates from the moment there is the mark, within and without the author's intention. To devote one's time only to the *why* is to fall into Plato's trap, if Derrida is correct in labelling it such.

Plato's irony is a dramatic irony that, interrupted, plays on, from author to author, and so we come to Derrida's own card play of authorship, inheritance and irony – "Envois" (1980). Published in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, "Envois" takes the form of an interrupted series of postcards sent, *it seems*, by a man with the same history as Derrida, to a woman, *perhaps*, whom he loves. The author of the cards, who is Derrida and not Derrida, who is an author but without authority, investigates communication, legacy, language, metaphysics, metaphor and psychoanalysis through irony and parataxis. In French the card – *carte* – is an anagram of *écart* meaning division or interval. Thus the post card is the "*écart postale*" (E 37), the post interval, gap, difference; the post(al) parataxis. Derrida plays this card against Plato's perfect (sleight of) hand, the hand of one of the "greatest counterfeiters in history" (E 22). What is presented is both a *récit* and a record, a live, elenctic dialogue and a dead, false monologue: "our Socratic novel, our infernal post card history" (E 176), a prose always happening, always stepping and turning without arriving.

Paratactic Postcards

"Envois" is a text of anacoluthic, paratactic irony, a text of catastrophic tropes and turns. *Catastrophe* comes from the ancient Greek *καταστροφή*, to over-turn, to take a sudden turn, and as such is a radically interruptive movement, the "not-following" of the anacoluthon. "Envois" is an *ironic correspondence*, a distorted reflection, the image of something always interrupted or just out of sight, out of the bright sun of the thetic and the propositional. The postcards on which the correspondence takes place – shocking postcards, that depict a beautiful, noble Socrates writing while a small, ugly Plato prods him in the back – operate as a performance of parataxis: the cards function as marks or letters that can be anagrammatically reordered according to the reader's whim. The cards are joined across the *blanc* of space – on the page – and time – in the narrative –; conjunctions are given to them in the process of reading. This parataxis is, however, doubly performed or repeated by the interruption that occurs within the

cards themselves. At irregular intervals the cards are ruptured by gaps of “52 signs, 52 mute spaces” (E 5), *blancs* which point to missing sections of indeterminate length. At times the blanks are grammatically or syntactically insurmountable, an impassable abyss, while at others the structure permits continued reading, and a (false) sense to be gleaned from the passage: “I have said nothing in comparison to what you know in advance that I would have wanted to say to you [... 52 ...] for it has not escaped you that the other omnipresent one, my immense one, is you” (E 107).

The catastrophic postcard, a reproduction of a 13th century engraving by Mathew Paris, constitutes an apocalypse, one that

allegorises the catastrophic unknown of the order. Finally one begins no longer to understand what to come [*venir*], to come before, to come after, to foresee [*prévenir*], to come back [*revenir*] all mean – along with the difference of the generations, and then to inherit, to write one’s will, to dictate, to speak, to take dictation. (E 21)

In the age of the post card – in the post age – progression is confused, as to come before and to come after become contaminated; to be in front designates both the earlier and the later. Plato stands behind Socrates, forcing him, urging him, commanding him to write, and thus Plato inherits, not from Socrates, but from himself: “The presumptive heir, Plato, of whom it is said that he writes, has never written, he receives the inheritance but as the legitimate addressee he has dictated it, has had it written and has sent it to himself” (E 52). Hence, as Derrida explains, “everything begins, like the post card, with reproduction. Sophie and her followers, Ernst, Heinele, myself and company dictate to Freud who dictates to Plato, who dictates to Socrates” (E 63). The scene of inheritance of “Envois” plays out the theatre of irony outlined in “Khōra” – we inherit from and within a “structure without an indivisible origin” (K 119). The Plato we receive is one understood by years of interpretation, from Aristotle to Derrida, and so each new interpretation reprograms our reception and rewrites history. Each new work dictates to the old work, which swells to contain it, and so we are always “today on the eve of Platonism. Which can also, naturally, be thought of as the morning after Hegelianism” (PP 107-08).⁴⁶

⁴⁶ This is performed in the reading of irony in this thesis, which traces a movement back and forward between – primarily – Socrates, Schlegel, de Man and Derrida.

There is no point of absolute origin, just re-readings and reproductions. The *post card*, its abyssal *blanc* or invisible hyphen emphasising its temporal exigency and remove from a single, direct proper name, is the reproduction of reproduction, the (re)birth of repetition that supports writing. As Catherine Malabou writes, the “fantasy of a whole metaphysics” consists in “knowing from whence one has left, whither one is going, writing after having spoken, seen, traversed, explored”.⁴⁷ The post card is “the insupportable partition of the support” (E 27), a hymen or hyphen that gives no stable position in an order or system, that does not allow for the direct propositions of a thesis, that confuses subject and predicate, S and P, and therefore never presents or supports propositional knowledge.

What I prefer, about post cards, is that one does not know what is the front or what is the back, here or there, near or far, the Plato or the Socrates, recto or verso. Nor what is the most important, the picture or the text, and in the text, the message or the caption, or the address. Here, in my post card apocalypse, there are proper names, S. and p., above the picture, and reversibility unleashes itself, goes mad. (E 13)⁴⁸

In the era of the post card we begin having already begun, and thus, in a performance of ironic, non-linear inheritance, we see that “in the beginning was the post” (E 66).⁴⁹ Thus the post card era is not an era, and a new metaphysics cannot be founded on the postal system, even though “the very idea of the halt, and the idea of the epoch in which Being holds itself back, suspends, withdraws, etc., all these things are immediately homogeneous with postal discourse” (E 65). There is no longer a metaphysics, just “*envois* without destination” (E 66).⁵⁰

A letter – systematic, semantic, syntactic – is written, enclosed in an envelope, signed, sealed, addressed, sent and delivered. It has a strict sense of origin and destination; a recognised individual or institution sends a message of univocal meaning to an individual or institution equally recognisable. The

⁴⁷ Catherine Malabou and Jacques Derrida, *Counterpath: Traveling with Jacques Derrida*, trans. David Wills (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004) 189.

⁴⁸ In “Of an Apocalyptic Tone” Derrida writes “One does not know (for it is not of the order of knowing) to whom the apocalyptic dispatch returns; it leaps from one place of emission to the other” (AT 27).

⁴⁹ The deferred resolution of Vasiliou’s conditional irony could be reinscribed here – were there a beginning then there would be an end, were there a legible address there would be a received delivery, were there a single author there would be simple destination. But there are not.

⁵⁰ And yet metaphysics is always the verso, always the card’s other side, ironically hyphenated, opposite and conjoined.

paratactic post card, however, overturns this logocentric system; it is “an open but illegible letter” (E 12), received by all who encounter it and yet understood – totalised, completed, saturated – by none. There is always *destinerrance*: the post card arrives everywhere and nowhere; as all code can potentially be cracked it cannot be encrypted or protected so that only the intended addressee will understand it. Arriving at its supposed destination does not make it present to itself or complete; as there is always remainder or excess it never fully arrives anywhere. It is thus “neither legible nor illegible, open and radically intelligible” (E 79). The post card is ironic parataxis or fragmentation, splinters that never added up to a whole: “a post card is never but a piece of a letter, a letter that puts itself, at the very second of the pickup, *into pieces*, and every piece *appears* simple, simpleminded, ingenuous and above all indivisible, unanalysable” (E 67). It is banal absence – all a post card ever says is “I am somewhere else” – and yet can contain the most catastrophic revelations or declarations – “I am (always) somewhere else”.

An insupportable support, the post card undoes the notion of the single, self-present subject. The correspondence is signed only twice; once in the preface, once on the back cover. The first signature, which as a preface is also the last, has a note attached, which reads: “I regret that you [*tu*] do not very much trust my signature, on the pretext that we might be several” (E 6). Each person, each pair “is an immense dispersed collection” (E 186) of mutable gender, name and identity. “Envois” abuses “dates, signatures, titles or references, language itself” (E back cover), and deliberately confuses fact and fiction, as the figure of the author, authenticating and validating output, is anacoluthically interrupted. Pronouns in the post age function as ironic points of parataxis, signs that can sign in any direction – deixis adrift – and thereby perform the impossibility of autonomous identity:

Plato’s dream: to make Socrates write, and to make him write what he wants, his last command, *his will*. To make him write what he wants by letting (*lassen*) him write what he wants. Thereby becoming Socrates and his father, therefore his own grandfather (PP) and killing him. (E 52)

As Plato becomes Socrates, becomes his own father, the pronouns fade into each other. Instead of turning towards the mirror, and in the turn constituting the self, in the ironic, post card era it is always “a question of turning one’s back [*dos*]. Of

turning my back to them by pretending to address myself to them and to make them bear witness” (E 178).

In presenting what looks like a mode of performative reflexivity – “publishing that which concerning the post card, looks like a ‘post card’” (E 175) – the author disguises the truth; that there is no more perfect, direct or literal correspondence – *plus de metaphore*. In keeping with the strange doubling that takes place between the author and Plato the author gives his own perverformative mark – the 52 spaces.⁵¹ These spaces hint at important secrets concealed, at a discourse that was entirely other, and yet their elusive promise may be no more than perjury. The mark of omission is omitted in an important promise – the oath read aloud by Derrida before entering the Bodleian.⁵² This reads: “*I hereby undertake ... not to bring into the library or kindle therein any fire or flame ... and I promise to obey all rules of the Library*” (E 216). Why, on promising not to commit anything to the flames, does Derrida ignore the mark that designates the incinerated? Was the promise never properly made? Does Derrida break or keep both promises? What of the section of cards that make up “Telepathy”? What do they do to the promise of having burnt all the rest? Every post card promise becomes a perverformative perjury.

Socrates, writes the author, plays with parataxis, “with the blank spaces, the indentations, the simulacra of punctuation in the other’s text” (E 49). The post cards are a performance of a mode of writing that manipulates irony and parataxis, the non-thetic and the non-propositional: “At bottom I am only interested in what cannot be sent off, cannot be dispatched in any case” (E 14-15). The ironic parataxis of the post cards and their blank spaces is excessively matched by the parataxis within the cards:

I tend to you, I tender nothing, I tender you, yourself, I tend myself towards you, I await [*attends*] you, I say to you “hold”, keep what I would like to give you, I don’t know what, more than me doubtless, keep, come, halt, reassemble, hold us together, us and more than you or me, we are awaited [*attendus*] by this very thing, I know neither who nor what, and so much the better, this is the condition, by that very thing which destines us, drop it. (E 64-65)

⁵¹ See chapter two and “Envois” 136.

⁵² This point is an extension of Simon Morgan Wortham’s in *Derrida: Writing Events* (London: Continuum, 2008) 24.

This passage of almost perfect parataxis – an interrupted parataxis – exemplifies the ironic movement of the cards throughout, as figures, language, and themes hyphenate themselves to join and disperse in myriad ways. Writing is a hyphen that attracts and repels: “Do I write to you in order to bring you near or in order to distance you, to find the best distance – but then with whom?” (E 78) Words leave footprints, and have a progression and evolution that is as alinear as inheritance. They consist of vast spaces normally concealed: “a b s o l u t e” (E 167) and “i l l e g i b l e” (E 176), and comprise levers and paratactic units that rework and reorder themselves, tiny movements than make countries fall: “I love the delicate levers that pass between the legs of a word, between a word and itself to the point of making entire civilisations seesaw” (E 78).⁵³

Parataxis is a style that stresses movement and process, emphasising production over the product. The postal principle is a “differential relay, that regularly prevents, delays, endispatches the depositing of the thesis, forbidding rest and endlessly on the run” (E 54). In the “becoming-prose of our Socratic novel” (E 173) the author is always *en train*, on the course, in the course, in the process; moving, travelling, going, leaving, turning. “Envois” is a work of movement, of negotiation, of forces, of re-ordering, of re-writing, of inter-ruption, irony and parataxis. Identity passes each by while doubling and mirroring (itself): “I pass you and you pass me [*je te double et tu me doubles*]” (E 200). This paratactic path of the cards makes it impossible to settle on a single, univocal meaning; there is no clear dividing line between the literal and the figurative. The post cards comprising “Envois” address

everything that concerns the *voie*, viability, crossroads, walking, feet and legs, back-and-forth, the *fort/da*, proximity and distancing. Of course it will be difficult to decide, to sort out, to separate on the one hand and on the other: when is it a question of all this directly, or “literally”? And when by means of a detour, a figure or presupposition? (E 177)

The figures spend their lives *en voiture*, always moving, always in the car, always (in) the vehicle. Never the tenor. Thus while Derrida pits his cards against Plato’s sleight of hand both are playing with parataxis, with the irony of performativity

⁵³ The author complains about spelling mistakes throughout the text. Interestingly, in the English translation Schlegel’s journal *Athenaeum* (*Athenäum*) is misspelled as “Athaeneum” (E 189).

and skewed reflexivity, a force of potentiality, a style that always says more than it explicitly states.

A “metaphoric catastrophe” (E 46) occurs in the post card era. “No more is post a metaphor” (E 46), instead “metaphor is a stamp: the tax, the duty to be paid on natural language and on the voice” (E 46). Metaphor is no longer a simple turn from a direct communiqué, but “as the site of all transferences and all correspondences, [is] the ‘proper’ possibility of all possible rhetoric” (E 65). Which is itself always improper, plural and paratactic. The post cards are the “retreat [*retrait*] of metaphor. I have made a story of voyages (and not a narration of a voyage) and of the very very divided trait (*Riss*) out of it” (E 153): the re-treat and re-tracing of language that turns away from “natural” language.⁵⁴ The saturation of the system of differences by metaphor results in a form of performative reflexivity. As Derrida writes regarding metaphor: “I cannot *treat it* without *dealing with it* ..., I can no longer stop the vehicle or anchor the ship, master without remainder the drifting, skidding or sideslipping [*dérapiage*]” (RM 49). The reflexivity of this general metaphoricity, in which a discourse on a topic becomes an example of the topic, is the performance of a descriptive content.⁵⁵ In this case again the perperformative breaks the mirror; the excess of metaphoricity undoes itself. This catastrophic reflexivity can be found in the term *metaphor* itself. *Metaphor* comes from the Greek to carry, to transport, and is still a vehicle or load bearing term. A metaphor is a metaphor, and as such has an unusual relation to the law of genre; unlike the mark “novel”, it is what it designates. Thus in this case, the mark of belonging *does* belong as the mark is included in what it classifies, but it is this very act of reflexivity that undoes reflexivity. A general metaphoricity undoes the very notion of the metaphor – there is no proper from which to turn. The metaphor is always thus (im)properly named, always a mixed metaphor and catachrestically turning on and away from itself.

⁵⁴*Trait*, in both English and French, signifies a line, a stroke, a style, a characteristic, while *retrait* translates from French as a (parabolic) step back, a withdrawing, and is used with a hyphen by Derrida to denote *re-trait*, redrawing. See “The *Retrait* of Metaphor”. The trait of the *retrait* of metaphor is a force which connects in a way that allows meaning to be. It is something while being nothing in itself, an ironic hyphen that exists to join, but that begins, through juxtaposition, to parasitically absorb a certain degree of signification. It is the metaphor of metaphor, the trope of tropes, the irony of parataxis and parabasis. Always plural it is always a fragmented parataxis, stepping beyond the thematic and the thetic. Metaphor as *retrait* has a parabolic step, the excessive step of irony. Metaphor is re-drawn as ironic catachresis, as a valency that can turn in any direction, that will always signify beyond itself and can never be thetically contained.

⁵⁵ See chapter two.

The cards perform parabolic, anacoluthic irony, as theme and tone is infinitely interrupted. Philosophical reflections on the nature of inheritance are interrupted by images of Plato as a tram conductor, of Socrates as a croupier. Theories of dissemination are disrupted by speculations on sending sperm via the post card (E 24), discussions of maieutics by conjectures that “*Socrates* is having his period” (E 133). As the author writes: “His friend had told me one day (or wasn’t it you?) that a given, apparently rigorously theoretical text was written such that it gave him an erection whenever he read it” (E 175). The academic is intermingled with the sexual, and so the postal principle becomes the pleasure principle. The cards are an anacoluthic apostrophe – “Thus I apostrophise. This too is a genre one can afford oneself, the apostrophe. A genre and a tone” (E 4). The apostrophe, the direct address, is both interruption – the sequence is interrupted as the speaker or writer turns to directly address someone – and is interrupted – direct address from one to another is impossible.⁵⁶ In keeping with the confused monologue/dialogue of the post cards, apostrophe becomes an address to the self, and even then it is indirect and interrupted (by the selves). A mark used to denote absence – *don’t* – and possession – *Derrida’s* – the apostrophe turns in on itself, its address, presence and absence a permanent parabasis. It, like the hyphen, is a mark of addition and subtraction, a time difference or delay within the postal network.

⁵⁶ In “Telepathy” the author turns to the reader in an apostrophe, asking her to speak, to interrupt as a comma: “Tell me, the truth, my little comma [*dis-moi, la vérité, ma petite virgule*]” (T 246). As Naas writes, in the telepathetic, and yet wholly interrupted exchanges that occur/are investigated,

“Telepathy” now means not the correspondence between an interior psychic event and an external “reality” but the welling up of both that event and that reality from a wholly other source – from the wholly other within: an other that could even go by the name “the unconscious”. (*Taking* 85)

Fragments of Irony: Schlegel, Blanchot and Aphorisms

Introduction

As de Man wrote, “if you are interested in the problem and the theory of irony, you have to take it in the German tradition” (AI 167). This chapter turns to the writer credited for re-instating a philosophical irony – Friedrich Schlegel. “No idea is isolated”, wrote Schlegel, “but is what it is only in combination with all other ideas” (I 95) – his is a theory and performance of radical fragmentation, hyphenation and progression. For Schlegel works must be produced “as a great hyperbaton¹, anacoluthon, hysteron proteron²” (FI 989), that is, containing and performing an irony of interruption and conjunction that is not an aesthetic reflection on the limitations of the self, but a project of progression, *poiesis*, and *Bildung*: “*Bildung* is antithetical synthesis and perfection to the point of irony” (PF 637).

“The Athenaeum is our birthplace”,³ boldly state Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy. While Derrida very rarely (directly) addresses this place of birth, this heritage is inescapable, as German romanticism is not simply “a contradictory entity, but ... a phenomenon that has to a great extent shaped our attempt to grasp it”.⁴ We (re)receive romanticism having already received it; Derrida, despite his claims not to have read Schlegel, has already read it, and his engagement with “the infinite powers of fiction, of poetry, and of irony” (P 166) is strongly indebted to and engaged with the fragmentary writings of Friedrich Schlegel.⁵ We thus use Blanchot to hyphenate the ironies of Derrida and Schlegel.

The connections between Blanchot and Schlegel are long established. Gerald Bruns writes that “It looks as if Jena Romanticism were the tradition in which Blanchot would seem most likely to situate himself, and so, in a sense, it is,

¹ A figure of speech in which logical word order is interrupted or inverted for emphasis or effect.

² A figure of speech in which word order is inverted, and what should come last comes first: *shoes and socks*. In logical terms the *petitio principii*, the logical fallacy in which the principle to be proven is already assumed in the premise, is also sometimes referred to as a hysteron proteron.

³ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, trans. Philip Bernard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988) 8.

⁴ Marc Redfield, “Romanticism, Bildung, and the ‘Literary Absolute’”, *Lessons of Romanticism: A Critical Companion*, ed. Robert F. Gleckner and Thomas Pfau (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998) 41-42.

⁵ See “Istrice 2: Ick bün all hier” in *Points*.

since it is the tradition of the fragment or of plural speech”.⁶ Leslie Hill sees in Blanchot and Schlegel a common interest in authorial anonymity, symphilosophy, revolution, self-reflexivity, fragmentation, the reworking of the literature/philosophy relationship and theory as fiction and commentary.⁷ Seeking a plural speech of dissymmetry and irreversibility, a mode of writing such that “the continuity of the movement of writing might let interruption as meaning, and rupture as form, intervene fundamentally” (IC 8), Blanchot turned to the fragmentary, over which we cross from romanticism to deconstruction. From Schlegel to Derrida we turn from transcendence to transgression, the subject-(non)work to alterity-text, the incomprehensible to the impossible, the literary absolute to the absolute nonabsolute, and from Schlegel’s novels – the “Socratic dialogues of our time” (L 26), to fragmentary, interrupted post cards – the “becoming-prose of our Socratic novel” (E 173). We conclude with a reading of “*Che cos’è la poesia?*” (1988); the *poematic*, the fragments of the “by heart” and ironic citation.

The German Romantic Subject-(non)Work

According to Schlegel, in the beginning was absolute nothingness (PF 592), followed by the chaos and incomprehensibility from which reality is constructed (OI 305).⁸ However, in attempting to comprehend the chaos of the infinite through system and reason, humanity distances itself from it. It is only by anacoluthically hyphenating system and non-system, reason and chaos, the playful and the earnest, the objective and the subjective through a *poiesis* or production that is poetry and philosophy, intention and instinct, real and ideal that the finite individual can (endlessly) transcend her limitations and step towards the unattainable infinite. German romantic art did not simply aim to represent chaos, but *be* the *becoming* of chaos. That, wrote Schlegel, is the work’s “real essence: that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected” (A 116). The romantic work was “a progressive, universal poetry [that] tries to and should mix and fuse poetry and

⁶ Gerald L. Bruns, *Maurice Blanchot: The Refusal of Philosophy* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997) 149.

⁷ Leslie Hill, “A Fragmentary Demand”, *The Power of Contestation: Perspectives on Maurice Blanchot*, ed. Kevin Hart and Geoffrey H. Hartman (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2004) 105-06.

⁸ That is, that which appears chaotic to the human senses. Following Schlegel’s conversion to Catholicism, “chaos” was either rewritten as the divine, or used to represent it.

prose, inspiration and criticism” (A 116).⁹ It was “capable of the highest and most variegated refinement” as, “on the wings of poetic reflection”, it could “raise that reflection again and again to a higher power ... multiply it in an endless succession of mirrors” (A 116).

The romantic work was what Derrida termed a poetico-literary performativity or contaminated performative/constative, a work that describes/critiques itself as it presents itself, that is always, in “artist reflection and beautiful self-mirroring ... simultaneously poetry and the poetry of poetry” (A 238). Schlegel repeatedly emphasised the need for reflexivity between content and form, writing that “Poetry can only be criticised by way of poetry. A critical judgement of an artistic production has no civil rights in the realm of art if it isn’t itself a work of art” (L 117). In performing what it describes and reflecting on itself, the romantic, ironic work was not simply a production, but a theory of production, a reflexive autoproduction or *autopoiesis*. Which, as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy establish, is the absolute of literature – the literary absolute. However, the reflexivity or self-consciousness of the romantic work operates through a concave lens – it does not tend towards a single point, but diverges out in ironic excess.

As *autopoiesis*, the romantic work was not simply a becoming of itself, but the becoming of the author: an autobiography¹⁰, “quintessence” (DP 103) or “encyclopaedia” (L 78) of the subject. In a burst of inspiration, instinct and intention the author produces the work, and in that act produces herself; the work is thus both the “portrayed” and the “portrayer” (A 116), the “producer” and the “product” (A 238). The work (re)presents the author at the moment of creation; once the work has been written and is capable of being analysed, the self that created it is no more. The finitude of the subject has been destroyed; the subject is

⁹ The term “work” in Schlegel, like most of his terms, doesn’t have a fixed or static meaning. While the work is defined as that which is in a state of (unsystematic) becoming, Schlegel also wrote that “System is not so much a method of form as the essence of the work itself” (FI 931). The work is systematic and non-systematic, closed and open. The work is not restricted to a particular genre: the novel, the poem and the fragment are not rigorously separated in Schlegel’s texts. Thus Schlegel writes that the “keystone” of a “real aesthetic theory of poetry” would be “a philosophy of the novel” (A 252). Fragment 116 moves between the poem and the novel, Shakespeare is a poet (A 253), all prose is really poetic (LN 608) and “The entire book is a struggle of prose and poetry, where prose is trodden underfoot and poetry breaks its own neck” (A 418).

¹⁰ Interestingly, when Schlegel describes dramatic irony in “On Incomprehensibility” he defines in terms of autobiography – “when an author has written three acts, then unexpectedly turns into another man and now has to write the last two acts” (OI 304).

now a work which is always in excess of itself, and therefore infinite. However, in opening herself up to this infinity, the subject also loses herself in the symphilosophy¹¹ and the infinite complexities and ironies of language. As Schlegel writes, “words often understand themselves better than do those who use them” (OI 298): the subject becomes interrupted by the potentiality of language. The subject thereby becomes open to the ironic, hyphenated connections of language and society; “freely relinquish[ing] first one and then another part of one’s being”, operating as “a plurality of minds and a whole system of persons” (A 121). Thus the act of self-creation is an act of self-destruction, and the subject can now reflect, transcend herself, and progress to a new level of understanding. Which spurs on a new act of creation, and the process continues.

“Only a system is really a work. Every other essay cannot close, only break off or cut off; it ends always necessarily annihilatingly or ironisingly” (FI 893). If a work implies closure, it is not surprising that romanticism is renowned for its absence of (completed) works; Blanchot describes romanticism as creating “the work of the absence of (the) work” (IC 353), where writing and literature in its quest to be undoes itself. The essence of the romantic work is that “it is always only coming into being, and can never be completed” (A 116); as such it is a work that can never be a work, and is rather an interrupted, parabolic (non)work. Critchley describes romanticism as “unworked”, though he sees this failure not as “a proof of weakness, but ... as a sign of strength”.¹² The romantic work is described by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy as the “subject-work”, “the becoming-artist of the work or absolute auto-production itself: man as a work of art creating itself, art henceforth identified with the being-artist”.¹³ While Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy’s term *subject-work* is an excellent expression of the romantic product, its fault lies in just that – it over-emphasises the product. The rather ugly term *subject-(non)work* is more appropriate, as it indicates both the absence of completion and the process.

¹¹ Symphilosophy, the working together and union of minds, is of necessity an engagement that is oppositional and fraught, as without confrontation and a rigorous questioning of ideas nothing will be learnt: “Philosophers who aren’t opposed to each other are usually joined only by sympathy, not by symphilosophy” (A 112). As part of the symphilosophy the subject is individual and of a multiplicity. Gary Handwerk sees symphilosophy as the defining, ethical feature of Schlegelian irony (*Irony and Ethics in Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) 18-90).

¹² Simon Critchley, *Very Little ... Almost Nothing* (London: Routledge, 1997) 97.

¹³ Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 77.

Schlegel and Irony

“Irony,” wrote Schlegel, “is the clear consciousness of eternal agility, of an infinitely teeming chaos” (I 69). Irony is that which enables the mind, petrified by the (Platonic) system of order and contexts, to step up to the connections and transgressions of language and life, and create a life/art which steps towards the infinite. “Irony,” furthermore, “is the form of a paradox. Paradox is everything simultaneously good and great (L 48). Paradox lies between extremes, between the vast gulf of the (human, debased) good and the (divine, transcendent) great, but also plays on and within the extremes themselves, in the hairbreadth between what is good and what is great. Irony is thus a paradoxical irony that does not allow paradox to rest. It is that which parabolically undercuts and undermines itself, a permanent anacoluthon.

Socratic irony was for Schlegel the classical basis for a progressive romanticism, and was not (simply) a rhetorical irony, but an irony of the “sublime urbanity of the Socratic muse” (L 42). Socratic irony is a poetic irony, a “truly transcendental buffoonery” (L 42) that pervades all and raises it up to the heights of philosophy through parody and play. Lamenting the fact that to his contemporaries irony was no more than sarcasm, Schlegel described Socratic or Platonic irony as a “scientific irony of exploratory thoughts and the highest cognition ... a consciousness and thinking that has attained harmony and become aware of the secret contradictions even in its innermost striving for the highest goal” (ZW 352). Philosophy as practised by Socrates was deeply ironic: “Philosophy is the real homeland of irony, which one would like to define as logical beauty; for wherever philosophy appears in oral or written dialogues – and is not simply confined into rigid systems – there irony should be asked for and provided” (L 42). But while Socratic irony is elenctic inquiry and transcendental questioning, it is also

nothing more than the astonishment of the thinking spirit about itself, which so often dissolves in a gentle smile; and again this smile of the spirit, which is although a deep lying sense, conceals and encloses an other, higher meaning of sublime seriousness under the carefree surface. (ZW 353)

Socratic irony was playful and yet deeply earnest, hiding deep engagement behind a carefree smile. Socrates’ irony lay in the unattainability of his position – there

was always something concealed about him, and as such he physically exemplified ironic communication, an “involuntary and yet completely deliberate dissimulation” (L 108).¹⁴ It is always in excess of itself, always performing its own parody, a hyphenation of intention and instinct. As that which is both automatic and deliberate it causes the speaker to receive her own words, to listen to what language says beyond her control or intention. Hence irony is the “impossibility and the necessity of complete communication” (L 108). It is the “continuous self-parody” (L 108) of the author, the work and language, anacoluthically synthesising the self with the self to reveal incompletions and inadequacies. An “alternating parody, parody to a higher power” (FI 517), irony is the parody of parody.

For Schlegel irony is non-propositional; it can never be explained in direct statements but must be instinctively grasped. Those who have no feeling for irony, writes Schlegel, will endlessly alternate between its poles, inverting meaning as they “fluctuate endlessly between belief and disbelief until they get dizzy and take what is meant as a joke seriously and what is meant seriously as a joke” (L 108). Georgia Albert notes here a contradiction: while Schlegel condemns those who try to understand irony through inversion as “harmonious bores”, he then goes on to describe them as taking “what is meant as a joke seriously, and what is meant seriously as a joke”. This implies that there is in fact a right and a wrong way to take irony. Albert opines that there is a certain inescapability to the state of harmonious boredom, and that irony will always involve some vertigo. Albert summarises Schlegel’s position as: “there is a right and a wrong way to read irony: the wrong way is to think that there is a right and wrong way”.¹⁵ But, as Albert notes, every way of reading irony that involves definitions is the wrong way; one can only define and not define.

For Schlegel “Irony is a permanent parabasis” (PF 668).¹⁶ Parabasis is that which raises the work and the subject to a higher power – “Parabasis and choir [are] necessary (as intensification) in every novel” (FII 1682). Every system,

¹⁴ And yet irony, according to Schlegel, plays no part in deception; it deceives only those who consider it a hidden, duplicitous tool to be wielded, and tricks only those who think of it as direct or simple inversion. Irony has an ethical force; it is not rhetorical but philosophical, committed to enquiry and pedagogy. Dialogic philosophy as practised by Socrates – and Plato – was ironic philosophy, a philosophy open to becoming, and for Schlegel irony was central to education and development.

¹⁵ Georgia Albert, “Understanding Irony: Three Essays on Friedrich Schlegel” *MLN* 108.5 (1993) 832.

¹⁶ See chapter two for more on parabasis.

writes Schlegel, should have a prologue, an epilogue, and be centred around an interruption, a digression, a *parabasis* (FI 933). The parabasis – in the romantic work not a separate section but a permanent movement within (FI 395) – was in Greek comedy a moment of theoretical reflection on the play, the author and the context. As a *permanent parabasis*, irony was then a performance of theory and work that characterise the ideal Romantic work. The step of parabasis is a movement of excess that interrupts the work and disallows correlation with a finite focus. It is the potency or intensification of the novel, the work as work *and* theory, the work of the work, and hence a reflection on and of the work.

Werner Hamacher describes the step of parabasis – he follows Schlegel and terms it *parekbase* – as the non-reflective condition of reflection; that which allows reflection while interrupting it:

on the one hand, the reflection must step back from what is reflected – and indeed necessarily step back by means of the eccentric step of *parekbasis* – in order to be able to move in the medium of intuition, representation, or thought towards what is reflected. On the other hand, *parekbasis* brings to nought every representation and undoes the self-securing of the subject by “completely interrupting and cancelling” every relation in the act of positing. Poetic *parekbasis* constitutes an uncontrollable, dramatic-grammatical trope whose exorbitant movement displaces the framework for every epistemological paradigm of reflective representation.¹⁷

Parabasis – irony – does not cancel self-reflection, as it provides the step back from the subject to allow it to reflect, yet in stepping back it interrupts the self-reflection and self-positing of the subject. As a “complete interruption and suspension” (CG 88) of both itself and the work’s content it becomes the “highest anti-form” (FI 395) on which no reflection can be imposed, a chasm in the work that reflection cannot (quite) penetrate. Like writing, ironic parabasis is the anti-form or anti-tain of the mirror that does not (simply) show the subject, but the absolute, the infinite, that which has been there long before the self-positing (of the) subject. It is the disruption that is both the space of reflection and the absolute cancellation of that reflection, the stepping away from reflection that allows reflection to be.

Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy see Socrates as the subject, or Subject, of irony. He is, for them, “the locus of the very exchange that, as both a figure and a

¹⁷ Hamacher 249.

work, defines irony (or ‘logical beauty’ ...), which is the exchange of form and truth or, and this is strictly identical, of poetry and philosophy”.¹⁸ This means that Socrates is not merely subject, but *subject-genre*, through whom “*literature* is inaugurated (and inaugurates itself, with all the force of the reflexive, since irony is also precisely this: the very power of reflection or infinite reflexivity – the other name of speculation)”.¹⁹ Speculation, or theorisation, is for Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy a reflexivity that is productive of a subject. In the case of the reflexivity of irony, they argue, we are confronted with an infinite reflexivity or productive speculation that posits a self-positing subject. However, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy fail to note that the productive reflexivity of irony does not produce an $I=I$, but an $I=I+\text{excess}$, a self-positing that posits more than the self. Irony is a *perverformative* reflexivity that produces but is always anacoluthically interrupted and catachrestically askew. The subject is always in a metonymic or fragmentary relation to itself, only ever a part of itself.

According to Fichte, $I=I$ performs unconditioned, pure positing, in which the subject creates itself in the act of speaking about itself. “I am” is an expression of action *and* of the deed done, the *I* is actor *and* product of the action. Hamacher proposes that this formula can be broken down into the performative act of the positing *I*, and the constative statement of the posited *I* that reflects on the performance. The performative and the constative dimensions are joined by the copula – is – which performs the transition from positing to posited. But in the break – the hyphenation – of the copula a delay is introduced, so that there is a difference in the *Is*, and the subject, which for Fichte is immediately posited and positing without difference or delay, is in fact separated or fragmented by what Hamacher calls a leap. This leap – the step of parabasis – “impedes every immediate unity of the *I* with its reflection and ... makes it possible for this unity to appear at best as an infinite project”.²⁰ It is on this leap that Schlegel based his notion of a progressive, universal poetry.

By wanting to say itself, the subject says itself as an always already objectified subject, and thus says neither itself nor Being. It says nothing, and exceeds itself in saying this. The subject asserts itself from the position of already positing itself, and thus as something it is not. In other words, it does not posit

¹⁸ Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 86.

¹⁹ Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 86.

²⁰ Hamacher 233.

itself. It is the “already” of its being, and so $I=I$ is “I will have become”. It parasites itself, and is its own parabasis. “I is only the fiction of its existence”²¹ and thus a parabolic, interrupted subject, more and less than itself, stems not from a pure performative to a pure constative, but an interrupted, parabolic performative/constative.

Schlegel’s essay “On Incomprehensibility” (1801) is a performance of the impossibility of restricting irony to a rhetorical trope contained within isolated passages of a text. One can let “irony go to the winds” (OI 301) and realise that this simply causes it to spread, or “declare [one’s intentions] point-blank” (OI 301) and have them step away: irony is unavoidable. Ostensibly attempting to comprehensibly discuss the impossibility of comprehension, and to address, without irony, the concept of a pervasive irony, “On Incomprehensibility” is an engagement with the dizzying flux and alternation of irony. Schlegel argues both for and against incomprehension, stating that he absolutely detests it (OI 297) and that he wishes to create a new reader who will understand his work. And yet he also insists that everything depends on an impenetrable excess:

even man’s most precious possession, his own inner happiness, depends in the last analysis ... on some such point of strength that must be left in the dark, but that nonetheless shores up and supports the whole burden and would crumble the moment one subjected it to rational analysis. Verily, it would fare badly with you if ... the whole world were ever to become wholly comprehensible in earnest. (OI 305)

While Schlegel states that this dark point of strength would crumble if subjected to rational analysis, this does not imply that one should not question or investigate, nor that the incomprehensible is so easily annihilated. Rather that it is in excess of analysis, strong in its weak crumbling; it will collapse and spread and thereby stand firm. It is this insistence on the inevitability and necessity of the incomprehensible that leads Ronell to describe the *Athenäum* as “unassimilable, incomparable, dissociated. ... It cannot be grasped by philosophy or literature, by a history that counts on reference or accounts for itself with relative narrative tranquillity”.²²

The author’s text exists – perhaps – only once, at the point of writing (the subject-(non)work); after that it is open to the excess of the act of reading, and

²¹ Hamacher 238.

²² Ronell 160.

becomes a text anacoluthically and infinitely interrupted by possible interpretations. As potential readings propagate, so too do modes of irony, until we are left with the *irony of irony*, an irony that is an excessive, infinitely mutable force of indeterminacy. Or, put simply, “something that happens in more ways than one” (OI 304). This irony is the irony that the author cannot control, and that occurs

if one speaks of irony without using it, as I have just done; if one speaks of irony ironically without in the process being aware of having fallen into a far more noticeable irony; if one can’t disentangle oneself from irony anymore, as seems to be happening in this essay on incomprehensibility; if irony turns into a mannerism and becomes, as it were, ironical about the author; if one has promised to be ironical about some useless book without first having checked one’s supply and then having to produce it against one’s will, like an actor full of aches and pains; and if irony runs wild and cannot be controlled any longer. (OI 304)

Irony pervades – she who is aware of irony will find it everywhere in excess. Should we manage to “swallow up all these big and little ironies” (OI 304) the solution will be short lived and a “new generation of little ironies” (OI 304) will arise. Irony is never static; it is uncontrollable, and while being play is nonetheless something “one simply can’t play games with” (OI 304). The irony of irony, the ironic idea of irony, an irony of absolute perfection, is an irony of infinite mutability, a constant turning and interruption.

Irony and Antithetical Extremes

“Join the extremes”, wrote Schlegel, “and you will find the true middle” (I 74). For Schlegel most thoughts were incomplete, no more than the “profiles of thoughts” which “have to be turned around and synthesised with their antipodes” (A 39). But the truth of the “true middle” is incomprehensible and incomplete; it is always a few steps ahead, always requiring a new connection, a new unification of a new pair of opposites. The process of infinite hyphenation is none other than irony – “the analysis of the thesis and antithesis” (FI 802). Irony is the movement between endlessly adapting extremes such that an “idea is a concept perfected to the point of irony, an absolute synthesis of absolute antithesis, the continual self-creating interchange of two conflicting thoughts” (A 121). The ideal is marked by

an internal interruption that changes a perfect, absolute Idea into a hyphen or fragment, always incomplete and awaiting a further connection.

“*Irony* is regulated alternation; it is more than mere oscillation” (PF 592). Irony is not an infinite, static oscillation but an alternation of incomplete syntheses. That is, while irony does synthesise, each point of synthesis is marked by the absolute incompleteness of thesis and antithesis, as each term is a hyphen linked to and interrupted by every other term. Hence, while Critchley, for example, is correct in reading the ironic movement as a dialectics without reconciliation, “not completed in any intuition or in any coincidence of thought and the object of thought, i.e. the Concept”, the movement is not, or not simply, a “quasi-dialectical” or “interminable oscillation devoted to the indissoluble conflict of the absolute and the relative”.²³ The conflict between the absolute and the relative is indissoluble because of their *a priori* complicity – the absolute contains within it the chaos of hyphenated connections. One synthesises and does not synthesise, as each point is infinitely linked to every other point. There is not so much a lack of a synthesis, as a lack *within* the synthesis.²⁴ The hyphenation and paratactical functioning of irony means that each moment of synthesis is never closed. The antithetical poles of Schlegel’s opposites are already the pharmakon, already conjoined – and interrupted – but made to appear separate and distinct by a form of context-related reading. Thus the post cards get passed from Socrates to Schlegel.

For Schlegel the alternating movement of irony “unifies all, always destroys itself, always posits itself again” (FI 208). The work, and the subject, is infinitely perfectible, striving beyond itself, (re)creating itself and then destroying itself. Romanticism was committed to self-destruction – “That which doesn’t

²³ Critchley, *Very Little* 115.

²⁴ The problem of synthesis in Schlegel is contested. De Man argues that the “dialectic of the self-destruction and self-invention ... is an endless process that leads to no synthesis. ... irony engenders a temporal sequence of acts of consciousness which is endless” (BI 207). Peter Szondi states that “Schlegel prepared the way for the Hegelian dialectic” (*On Textual Understanding and Other Essays*, trans. Harvey Mendolsohn (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) 57) and “In the interplay between self-creation and self-destruction there occurs that ‘hovering’ which ... is the anticipation of a synthesis” (66). For him Schlegel’s obsession with unity and contamination is the drive for synthesis. Manfred Frank refers to the process as a “negative dialectic” (*The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*, trans. Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004) 214). Somewhat earlier Kierkegaard argued that the Hegelian dialectic incorporates the negative and achieves unity and progressive movement, while ironic questioning aims to “suck out the apparent content with a question and leave only an emptiness remaining” (Kierkegaard 73). Irony for Kierkegaard never achieves *Aufhebung*; it does not unify opposites but moves between them.

annihilate itself, has no worth” (FI 226) – but this self-destruction was accompanied by self-creation, by a positing different and anew. Many theorists have linked irony to self-restriction and the negative, antithetical position of a dialectic, as a response to Critical Fragment 28: “Feeling ... is divided spirit, is self-restriction: hence a result of self-creation and self-destruction”. However, positing irony simply as self-restriction ignores the fact that Schlegel also described irony as “the mood that surveys everything and rises infinitely above all limitation, even above its own art, virtue, or genius” (L 42).²⁵

Anne K. Mellor understands irony as “the counterforce to love and creative imagination”.²⁶ Irony is “a sceptical negation, with a ‘critical examination’ and rejection of existing beliefs and errors”,²⁷ the opposite of creative, romantic abandon:

the authentic romantic ironist is as filled with enthusiasm as with scepticism. He is as much a romantic as an ironist. Having ironically acknowledged the fictiveness of his own patternings of human experience, he romantically engages in the creative process of life by eagerly constructing new forms, new myths.²⁸

The distinction created by Mellor between romanticism and irony falsely presumes that romanticism and irony are separate categories. In fact, even though Mellor opposes irony to “love and creative imagination”, in a later essay Schlegel states that “True irony ... is the irony of love” (ZW 357). And while irony is related to scepticism – “Irony is the highest, purest σκέψις [skepsis]” (PFZ 1023), scepticism is not negation: “Scepticism is the condition of hovering reflection” (PFZ 955).²⁹

²⁵ Self-limitation is a movement affirming self-identity and the ability to control oneself, that is not “unlimited free will” (CF 37). Essentially all that Schlegel is proposing in this fragment is academic or artistic distance, whereby the author waits until she is no longer in the process of discovery and inspiration to present a measured view of something. This aesthetic standard has been overlooked by critics, who rushed to view irony as that which ties or limits one to the self. Frank argues that “Precisely this surpassing of all self-imposed limits is what Schlegel calls irony” (Frank 216).

²⁶ Anne K. Mellor, *English Romantic Irony* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1980) 11.

²⁷ Mellor 11.

²⁸ Mellor 5.

²⁹ Mellor’s misreading of irony is compounded by a misreading of deconstruction: “modern deconstructionists choose to perform only one half of the romantic-ironic operation, that of sceptical analysis and determination of the limits of human language and consciousness” (5). Deconstruction, for Mellor, is a sceptical negation, which means, by her own argument, that deconstruction is irony. She argues that irony, allegory and deconstruction are all reflections on the subject’s failure to encompass the world and the infinite.

Critchley also sees irony – accurately – as “the *sceptical* dissolution of the markers of certitude by which we attempt to understand the world and others within the world”.³⁰ The problem lies in the positing of this sceptical engagement as a strict oppositional position. Irony, for Critchley, “is the counter-concept to wit. If wit is *synthetic*, the chemical mixing of disparate elements, then irony is *diaeretic*, the separation or division of those elements. This diaeresis establishes an irreconcilable conflict between separated elements”.³¹ While Critchley acknowledges the interdependence of wit and irony, it is only as separate and opposing poles, part of “a ceaseless alternation between self-creation and self-destruction”³² that never connects. Irony is a conflict between opposites,³³ but a conflict that contaminates and conjoins – Critchley ignores the hyphenation. Wit is not, as he argues, simply synthesis: a “witty idea is a disintegration of spiritual substances which, before being suddenly separated, must have been thoroughly mixed” (L 34), while irony “is the synthesis of reflection and fantasy, of harmony and enthusiasm” (IP 1271). Irony is “philosophical wit” (FII 2172) – without enthusiasm it is a flat, empty form (FI 1047). Wit and irony posit the same movement of contaminated interruption, a conjunction that is a paratactic disjunction.³⁴ Irony is thus a *relation* rather than a determinate content, and a negation only insofar as it *complicates* identities and ideals.³⁵ Its movement shows that those we thought to be independent and totalised are contaminated, partial

³⁰ Critchley *Very Little* 114.

³¹ Critchley *Very Little* 114.

³² Critchley *Very Little* 115.

³³ Wilde posits an interesting movement between antithetical poles for irony without recourse to Schlegel. He argues that irony always generates its opposite, producing “as a response to its vision of disparity ... a complementary, more conceptual vision of wholeness or singleness, which I want to refer to as the *anironic*” (30). The ironic and the anironic themselves come together to form a *radical, absolute irony* which embraces the extremes of chaos and unity. The antithesis or anironical pole to absolute irony is then, for Wilde, “more narrowly and perhaps exclusively channelled into an exclusive identification with art” (32). Wilde is fundamentally arguing for a *sublation turned sublimation*, a unification of (self-generating) opposites in the form of the complete harmony of art: “Art is, finally, the exiled artist’s home, in which, remaining true to his perceptions, he is yet able – or so it seems – to bring consciousness to rest” (33).

³⁴ This is not to completely dissolve the differences between wit and irony, but to show that positing uncontaminated poles ignores the polyvalence of irony. Wit is *predominantly* the ability to recognise similarities, but also differences.

³⁵ A system suppresses and restricts the ironic movement of alternation: “In chaos + and – alternate, in a system both are fused” (IP 1520). Hence, if one wished to posit an opposite to irony, it is tempting to select stasis or the system, as Schlegel writes that “Every non-systematic form can be ironic” (FI 895). However, as with all the other dialectical pairings proposed by Schlegel, their a priori complicity and contamination cannot be ignored. Socrates is described as having lived systematically (FI 945), while the romantic novel, the permanent becoming, is “absolute system” (FII 1683). As Schlegel famously pronounced, “It is equally fatal for the mind to have a system and to have none. It will simply have to decide to combine the two” (A 53).

and contradictory. As Schlegel writes, irony is, as it were, “the *ἐπιδείξις* [epideixis] of infinity, the universal, of the sense for the whole world” (PF 76). *Epideixis* was a praise-by-blame speech designed to showcase the orator’s skill, and as such it emphasised not only the disjunction of the content of the speech, but also the orator’s abilities. Irony, as epideixis, showcases form, the form of interruption. Irony “reveals to the poet that his truth – from the point of view of the infinite – is his own limitation, or in other words, his finitude”.³⁶ But this finitude is not simply or statically negative, it is the infinite movement of becoming poet/philosopher: “One can only become a philosopher, not be one. As soon as one thinks one is a philosopher, one stops becoming one” (A 54).

Schlegel’s Fragments

Romanticism sought the absolute of literature, a *poiesie* that transcended divisions of literature and philosophy, a self-theorising work that encompassed all genres. In encompassing all genres the work becomes an act of production – *poiesis* – to the extent that it would *be*, rather than represent, or as Blanchot wrote, that it would

be everything, but without content or a content that is almost indifferent, and thus at the same time affirming the absolute and the fragmentary; affirming totality, but in a form that, being all forms – that is, at the limit, being none at all – does not realise the whole, but signifies it by suspending it, even breaking it. (IC 353)

The genre that effectively destroys all notions of genre while simultaneously being a theory on genericity should comply with the permanent becoming of the romantic idea, reveal the (in)dependence of the individual, embrace the contradictory and disclose the work of art as the production and expression of this subjective/objective consciousness. This radical form was the fragment, “the romantic genre *par excellence*”³⁷. For Blanchot the fragment’s discontinuous form is “the sole form befitting romantic *irony*, since it alone can make coincide discourse and silence, the playful and the serious ... the mind’s obligation to be systematic and its abhorrence for a system” (IC 358). The fragment is the perfect form that is at the same time the failure of form; “a genre that embodies failure

³⁶ Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 78.

³⁷ Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 40.

within itself, whose completion is incompleteness, whose structure is essentially ambiguous”.³⁸ It is, as Hamacher writes,

precisely the language that is not entirely language, not entirely itself but something other than, and different from language itself: a fragment would be that in which the face of language passed behind or beyond it; a fragment would be the language in which something other than itself – nothing, for example – also spoke and, therefore, a language in which at least two languages always spoke – a broken language, the break of language.³⁹

The romantic fragment is not an unfinished work or a section torn from a totalised whole, but a deliberate form simultaneously complete and incomplete, sovereign while calling to an indeterminate whole. As one of Schlegel’s most quoted fragments states, “a fragment, like a miniature work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a hedgehog” (A 206). The fragment must be totalised, independent and autonomous. Thus each fragment must be its own example, and as a romantic work theorise and comment upon itself. Its uniqueness rejects an example other than itself, and it is thereby itself and representation of itself, whole and internally fragmented, one and divided. It is a form of limits and limitlessness, a form of interruption and borders whose margins generate excess: “A work is cultivated when it is everywhere sharply delimited, but within those limits limitless and inexhaustible; when it is completely faithful to itself, entirely homogeneous, and nonetheless exalted above itself” (A 297).

The fragment is a thought that is both complete and incomplete, an instance of a single thought that exists complete in itself, and simultaneously is part of a progression or becoming: “a dialogue is a chain or garland of fragments. An exchange of letters is a dialogue on a larger scale, and memoirs constitute a system of fragments” (A 77). Thus while each fragment stands alone and extant, it still calls into the past and the future, sending itself to what preceded and will succeed it. In its divided structure the fragment calls attention to its boundaries, making them not a rift in what was a totalised whole, but limits that call to further, arbitrary progression. Each fragment is a project, a “fragment of the future” (A 22), a calling to what comes next and what will, even with each addition, remain

³⁸ Critchley *Very Little* 106.

³⁹ Hamacher 225.

indeterminate. Fragments are not themselves incomplete, they are removed from all notions of completion. Permanent becomings that call ahead to the unknown, they are a sending forward of thought and theory for subsequent and postponed resolution, so that “*work in progress* henceforth becomes the infinite truth of the work”⁴⁰. The fragments form a whole that is not the sum of their parts, and is neither greater nor lesser than each individual fragment. They cannot be read solely as aphoristic totalised wholes, nor as paragraphs that conjoin to form a greater whole, but as a form that is simultaneously both (and neither); that which “makes possible new relations that except themselves from unity, just as they exceed the whole” (IC 359). Fragments are a writing of discontinuity on which continuity is imposed, a force of alternating, ironic energy in which “every whole can be a part and every part really a whole” (L 14).

The lacunae that separate the fragments serve also to pull them together; they become borders that call to an entity beyond the border, that project the fragments into the future to infinite irresolution. The lacunae cause the fragments to operate on the borders of parataxis and syntax: non-conjunctive and paratactic, the fragments are autonomous, as separate from a greater whole they can neither be said to contradict nor support each other. In the act of reading the lacunae are charged, however, to positive and negative signs that create of parataxis a random syntax of fragments. In the illusion or supposition of a whole thought progresses past the interstices, rendering them conjunctions that create an unfixed syntax whose meaning is transient and indeterminate. Within this syntax the centre of thought can be fixed on any fragment, and thus the centre is eternally shifting, each fragment both its own centre and the possible centre of a illusory whole. Each fragment, isolated and alone, is always joined by an invisible hyphen to every other fragment. Both the author and the reader can make the error of syntax – imposing a false order on a paratactic system of fragments: “so powerful is the instinct for unity in mankind that the author himself will often bring something to a kind of completion which simply can’t be made a whole or a unit; often quite imaginatively and yet completely unnaturally” (L 103). Fragments are the performance of parabolic, paratactic irony, moments of contradiction and alteration that synthesise only through and with a lack – or excess.⁴¹ Inheriting

⁴⁰ Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 48.

⁴¹ The contradiction between the fragments is also a contradiction between each fragment and the absolute: “the fragment, which carries the contradiction of the infinite and the finite in itself ...

from Plato we too often attempt to impose a false order on what should remain paradoxical, forgetting that our systems stem from the suppression and denial of contradictions and inconsistencies. Hence Schlegel writes that “Every system grows only out of fragments” (FI 494), and “the greatest system is certainly only a fragment” (FI 921).

The fragment is the result of a flash, a lightning burst of inspiration, that “can elicit brilliant sparks and lustrous rays – or smashing thunderbolts” (L 34), and which is/represents the thought and experience of the author subject at a single instant. As such fragments are an assertion of the individuality and subjectivity of the author, preserved at that moment of insight: “All fragments as such belong to absolutely individual poiesie” (FI 476). In the act of production they simultaneously produce the author, they are her consciousness made into a work, and in that act of production move the author beyond herself – destroy her older self. This permanent becoming of the author creates a dialogue, “a chain or a garland of fragments” (A 77) with herself, which moves the author beyond herself and closer to the communal. Thus inasmuch as the fragments assert individual subjectivity they also destroy it, moving to the objective and the community. We cannot speak of a fragment, but rather of fragments, an unending, non-totalised plurality, and in the same way we do not speak of a subject, but subjects, the fragments dissolving the ego to create a universal symphilosophy. The fragment is an absolute close-up of a subject at a single moment in time, a microscopic concentration on a cell of thought to the extent that it reads as an anonymous particle, rather than the singular thought of a named and known subject. The fragment is thus absolutely individual, and a collective, symphilosophic writing, identity through non-identity.

Schlegel writes: “as yet no genre exists that is fragmentary both in form and in content, simultaneously completely subjective and individual, and completely objective and like a necessary part in a system of all the sciences” (A 77). In a sense then, Schlegel’s fragments are not fragments, but failed and interrupted fragments, the projects of fragments, the becoming of fragmentation. They do not exist and are thus non-works, or unworkings. The fragment thus performs its own theory, is its own theory and is irreducibly literary. Centred and

does not avoid stepping into new contradictions with other fragments, which in fact all share the tendency towards the infinite, but on the basis of their individuality provoke new reciprocal contradictions” (Frank 213).

centreless, singular and plural, unique and highly stylised, it is a highly self-conscious form that is yet invisible, insubstantial compared to the process that it allows to take place. Thus Blanchot names it the “work of the absence of (the) work” (IC 353), a formless form that reveals poetic production, “pure consciousness of the moment” (IC 353). The romantic fragment was an act of pure *poiesis*, a work whose pure production of the poetic act was superior to the product. Contradictory and beyond oppositional form, paratactic and syntactic, centred on itself while calling beyond itself, disrupting linear temporality, masked and open, subjective and objective, the fragment performs and produces itself and the author, destabilising itself and meaning.

The Step Bridge: Blanchot and the Fragmentary

Blanchot’s texts employ a fragmentary writing of ironic permanent parabasis, the “interruption of the incessant” (ED 21) whereby interruption has “the same meaning as that which does not cease” (ED 21). As an anacoluthon the work turns in and away from itself, disrupting discourse by conversing on that discourse, a self-renewing and ceaseless disturbance that fragments the work with simultaneous dissymmetric voices. As Leslie Hill writes on *The Madness of the Day*, “Blanchot’s stumbling narrative leads narrator and reader into an experience where each step forward is necessarily a step back”.⁴² In Blanchot each step forward is a step back, but each step is also not at step at all, or a skewed step, a step always interrupted. Language is the language of the other, the language that no one speaks, “nothing other than an allusion to the initial detour that is borne by writing and that carries it away, causing us, as we write, to yield to a sort of perpetual turning away” (IC 385).

For Blanchot the romantic project was based on failure, on a promise contaminated by a perjury. That romanticism was a becoming means that it has not come and may never come. At its heart is a non-belonging, or as Blanchot puts it, the “non-romantic essence of romanticism” (IC 357). This inclusion of the antithetical results in a *worklessness*, and a speech “whose task is not to say things (not to disappear in what it signifies), but to say (itself) in letting (itself) say, yet without taking itself as the new object of this language without object” (IC 357). The mode of writing that exemplified this internal, ironic otherness was the

⁴² Leslie Hill, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary* (London: Routledge, 1997) 194.

fragment, although Blanchot deemed the romantics to have misused the fragment; for Schlegel “to write fragmentarily is simply to welcome one’s own disorder, to close up upon one’s own self in a contented isolation” (IC 359). Blanchot argues that Schlegel’s formulation of the fragment is too close to the aphorism, which he describes as “the closure of a perfect sentence” (IC 359). Schlegel’s fragment is to be faulted for “having its centre in itself rather than in the field that *other* fragments constitute along with it”, for “neglecting the interval” between the fragments, and forgetting that the fragment “makes possible new relations that except themselves from unity, just as they exceed the whole” (IC 359). Schlegel, argued Blanchot, refused or ignored “the *opening* that the fragmentary exigency represents; *an exigency that does not exclude totality, but goes beyond it*” [emphasis added] (IC 359).

For Blanchot the fragment should be neither an independent totality – an aphorism – nor part of a greater whole – the fragment in the traditional sense – but that which is other to the totality and completion associated with a work. As such what interests Blanchot is not the fragment but the *fragmentary*, that which gives form to what this thesis has called ironic parabasis and parataxis. As parabasis the fragmentary is a border discourse, “a play of limits in which no limitation plays” (SB 44). The fragmentary plays no part in the setting forth of boundaries that mark and delimit; it is instead that which “has no external limit – the outside toward which it falls is not its edge – and at the same time no internal limitation (it is no hedgehog, rolled up and closed on itself)” (ED 46). Fragmentation is always of “fragments” (ED 60), and fragments are “unfinished separations” (ED 58), always insufficient and incomplete.

In *The Infinite Conversation* Blanchot precedes fragments with a positive and negative power: “±”. The fragments can be given a positive or a negative value, used in opposition or support, depending on the reading, so that the fragment is always wholly ambiguous, that is, always non-identical.⁴³ The act of

⁴³ Leslie Hill’s essay “A Fragmentary Demand” lists the other symbols used by Blanchot in his fragmentary or dialogic texts, and notes:

Oddly enough, these various icons rarely recur from one text to the next and are for the most part specific to the place in which they occur. While they gather together verbal material to form a series of textual fragments, identifying them as such, they also mark the singular placement of those fragments, which therefore remains irreducibly dispersed. And this double movement of gathering together and scattering apart is reflected in the given typographical devices, which function as a series of discrete syntactic markers

reading takes the parataxis of the fragments, in which they are “destined partly to the blank that separates them” (ED 58), partly to each other, and partly to deferral, and orders them into a syntax. As Blanchot states, “if to write is to arrange marks of singularity (fragments) from which routes can indicate themselves without reuniting nor joining the marks ..., there is always a risk that reading, *instead of animating the multiplicity of crossing routes, reconstitutes a new totality from them*” [emphasis added] (SB 51). Reading imposes order and closure, attempting to force the fragmentary to signify something concrete when it “refers to nothing and has no proper reference” (SB 49). Fragmentation is a writing of the disaster, a language that is estranged from itself and undoes limits and absolutes: “I call disaster that which does not have the ultimate for a limit: it bears the ultimate away in the disaster” (ED 28).

Blanchot’s fragments are distanced from Schlegel’s; no subject-work, or even subject-(non)work, the fragmentary “dismisses, in principle, the I, the author” (ED 61). They do not support a subject, nor (a univocal) meaning, but are anarchistic slogans like graffiti; “forms that are impossible to socialise or control”.⁴⁴ Writing, according to Blanchot, “belongs to the fragmentary when all has been said” (SB 42), when writing is catastrophic, disastrous, always a rewriting or citation. “*When all is said, what remains to be said is the disaster. Ruin of words, demise writing, faintness faintly murmuring: what remains without remains (the fragmentary)*” (ED 33).⁴⁵ Hence what Blanchot calls *grand irony*, which is not Socratic irony, not a feigned ignorance, but “saturation by impropriety (when nothing whatsoever suits anymore), the grand dissimulation where all is said, all is said again and finally silenced” (ED 45). Irony for Blanchot is “the power that is dissolution’s” (ED 45), the saying of everything that says nothing, that shows it impossible to say everything. Thus writing and irony are always disappointing: “it is impossible to lay claim to either; both exclude all mastery” (ED 35).

implying crossing (and crossing out), astral (i.e., dis-astral or dis-astrous) dispersion, neutrality, and violent inscription or incision. (116)

The typographical markers themselves perform the irony that reworks and unworks meanings within the fragments.

⁴⁴ Philip Beitchman “The Fragmentary Word” *SubStance* 12.2 (1983) 76.

⁴⁵ This is very close to Schlegel’s fragment: “‘Nothing is yet said.’ – <Tout est dit >” (FI 180). See Hamacher’s essay, quoted above, for an exposition of this fragment.

In Blanchot's "The Wooden Bridge", an analysis of Kafka's *The Castle*, there is a parabasis in the fragmentary relation between works, between the work as work and the work as discourse on the work. Each work is a self-exegesis which infinitely repeats itself (IC 390), as the work, lacking a beginning, can never end, and so commentary translates the work's ambiguity with an even more ambiguous exegesis. Blanchot sees the essential aspect of *The Castle*, K.'s traversing of the village in an attempt to reach the elusive stronghold, as a movement from exegesis to exegesis, from fragment to fragment. The castle becomes "a truth that seems always to say of itself more than anything one could say about it" (IC 394), while also being infinitely less, and the book itself, in being both work and self-commentary becomes the principle of ambiguity, where ambiguity is the "difference of the identical, the non-identity of the same" (IC 395). *The Castle* does not consist of a linked chain of events but a series of fragmentary exegeses that parabolically interrupt and step across each other, with each instance making the centre, the meaning of (the) narrative, as represented by the castle, recede further.

For Blanchot the fragmentary is not a production as it is for Schlegel, but an unworking or worklessness. This is not an inversion of *poiesis* but a *self-fragmenting poiesis*; the subject is not involved in an infinite, productive becoming but an infinitely occupying unworking: "*In me there is someone who does nothing but undo this me: infinite occupation*" (SB 66). To write then, in the fragmentary, is the "work of the absence of work, production that produces nothing except (or out of) the absence of a subject, mark that unmarks, infinitive in which the infinite would like to play itself out even to the neuter" (SB 55).

Derrida and the Irony of Aphorisms

"The idea of the book", writes Derrida, "which always refers to a natural totality, is profoundly alien to the sense of writing" (OG 18). Hence "We have played the post card against literature" (E 9), and turned to the *fragment*.⁴⁶ Derrida's aphorisms/fragments operate on the border of the system, and perform a false step or off beat within the system. They are a "discourse of dissociation" (AC 9) that nonetheless reveals an implicit association; an infinite series of finitudes that defy

⁴⁶ Because, after all, "is this interruption that condemns one to the aphorism not the condition of every conversation?" (ETC 290)

laws of continuity and transgression without their contradictory nature causing them to undo themselves. While Blanchot's fragments are an unworking, Derrida's can be seen as a hyphenated *reworking* that infinitely reorder to produce the unforeseeable event.⁴⁷ Derrida's aphorism/fragment is the name, the title, the post card; texts that demonstrate an operation *beyond* language *within* language; a parabolic, paratatic irony.

Derrida's texts appear at first glance to strongly differentiate between the fragment and the aphorism.⁴⁸ In "Istrice 2: Ich bün all hier" Derrida states that *The Literary Absolute* clarified the reservations he had always felt regarding the fragment and totalisation,⁴⁹ as it pointed to a "certain cult of the fragment and especially of the fragmentary *work* which always calls for an upping of the ante of authority and monumental totality" (P 302).⁵⁰ This sentiment is echoed in *Spurs*, where Derrida writes that the fragment's "fracturedness is itself an appeal to some totalising complement" (S 125).⁵¹ However, despite Derrida's reservations, his *use* of the fragment is very close to Schlegel's. In "Envois" the author describes the post cards which have survived the conflagration as *fragments*, appearing to use the term in a traditional, colloquial way: "Out of these two years, I would deliver to them only fragments circled with white" (E 177).⁵² And yet the existence of a unit pre-existing the act of fragmentation is persistently and pointedly in doubt; the fragments are taken from a whole that (arguably) never existed. The author insists that letter, that paradigm of the system and of closed

⁴⁷ This opposition should not create a strong sense of difference in the result of the modes of fragmentation, but note an important difference in verbalisation of the process.

⁴⁸ This is not to imply that Derrida uses either term with much frequency. As Daniel Watt, in "Derrida's Theatre of Survival: Fragmentation, Death and Legacy" briefly notes: "That Derrida rarely addresses fragmentation is an interesting issue, because so many of his texts have fragmentary modes, or aspects of the fragmentary form" (in *Derrida: Negotiating the Legacy*, ed. Madeleine Fagan et al, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007) 194.)

⁴⁹ The relation of Schlegel's fragment to the totality of the infinite is as an impossible aspiration.

⁵⁰ Watt follows this (mis)reading of Derrida's, referring to the "programmatically fragmentation of the German Romantics" (194). He draws a clear distinction between the aphorism and the fragment, referring to the latter in terms of its "obscure self-referentiality" (195). He proposes that a distinction between them lies in the name: "An aphorism is authored, a fragment gestures towards the anonymous" (196). Over the course of his article, however, Watt does recuperate the fragment, writing that the "movement of fragmentation will be one of chance then, of a connectivity which cannot be prescribed, but will be under the sway of a language that continually assumes a programmed system of reading" (201).

⁵¹ Derrida refers to fragments and fragmentation in *Spurs* as he analyses Nietzsche's "I have forgotten my umbrella". In a step away from any associations of totalisation, Derrida refers to this sentence as a "nonfragment" (S 127).

⁵² Names and dates are always ash, always unreadable. "The unreadable is readable as unreadable, unreadable insofar as readable; here is the madness that burns a date, consuming it from within. Here is what renders it ash, here is what renders ash from the first instance" (SQ 40).

units, “at the very instant when it takes place ... divides itself, puts itself into pieces, falls into a postcard” (E 81). A totalised whole never existed and so we “begin” with fragmentation.

Derrida describes the aphorism as surrounded by borders and boundaries: it “separates, it marks dissociation, it terminates, delimits, arrests” (AC 2). It is authoritative, it prophesises, speaks the truth and commands. It “must never refer to another. It is sufficient unto itself, a world or monad” (AF 24). Like Schlegel’s fragment, the aphorism “gathers everything together” (AF 44) – in including everything in itself the aphorism incorporates inside itself everything which it is not, it invaginates itself, taking within what (it) is without. In comprising everything it is nonetheless incomplete and awaiting a further step: “there is always more than one aphorism” (AF 45). The aphorism is thus always in a series, hyphenated internally and externally, its absolute isolation an absolute series. It is a full stop (AF 25) within ellipsis, a closure becoming interruption, omission, openness. Hence both the fragment – “Insaturable context” (BL 107) – *and* the aphorism are metonymies – parts of a whole – that point to the general absence of an uncontaminated whole, be it of the thing itself, or that from which it supposedly originated.⁵³

The fragmentary movement of Derrida’s aphorisms is a performance of ironic parataxis, an anagrammatical *reworking* of points within an endless ellipsis. The aphorisms are a “theatre of irony”, a *mise en abyme* or hypertext of term within a term within a term such that “Nothing ... is absolutely assured, neither the linking nor the order” (AC 9). At times the fragments delve deep into the definitions and associations of a term, explicating in one aphorism a term employed in the preceding fragment.⁵⁴ At others the link is not made until many fragments later, while in others the movement is not a progressive specificity but a generalisation.⁵⁵ There is no set, logical progression, just reworking and rereading through difference and alterity: “Aphorism: that which hands over every

⁵³ Should a distinction be insisted on, one could argue that Derrida’s aphorism is Schlegel’s fragmentary principle radicalised, its transgressive, ironic hyphenation – separation and conjunction – emphasised. See Timothy Clark, “Modern Transformations of German Romanticism: Blanchot and Derrida on the fragment, the aphorism and the architectural”, *Paragraph* 15 (1992) 243.

⁵⁴ For example, in “52 Aphorisms for a Foreword” aphorism 2 contains the word “true”, and so truth becomes the focus of aphorism 3, which contains the word “aphorism”, which then becomes the primary content of aphorism 4, which employs the term “problem”, which is taken up in aphorism 5.

⁵⁵ For example, in aphorism 6 we move to question what a project is *in general*.

rendezvous to chance” (AC 11). Hence the ironic parataxis of the aphorisms, hence the injunction: “Reader, visitor, get to work!” (AF 24).

The lacunae that figure between fragments and aphorisms are paths that allow for an infinite number of routes to be taken between fragments, and hence an infinite possibility of readings. At the same time, however, the caesuras present an unbridgeable abyss between fragments; the fragments are too isolated to be in opposition or contradiction. A collection of aphorisms presents ideas that radically contradict or consolidate an argument; these agreements or resistances are not however part of a set system, and any attempt to systematise them should recognise that the system is imposed and wholly born from the act of reading. One might compare the difference between the fragments to Lyotard’s problem of the differend, in which a case between parties “cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule applicable to both arguments”:⁵⁶ their particularity is such that no general rule can do them justice. Yet, as Derrida writes, “aphorisms can only multiply or be put in a series if they either confirm or contradict each other” (AF 44). Reworking – reading, interpreting – occurs through the false but necessary imposition of a system.

The complicity and contaminations between fragments and supposedly closed systems is exemplified in “52 Aphorisms” by the hyphenation of the aphoristic asystem and the architectural system. Derrida prefaces a book on architecture with a series of aphorisms, causing an immediate tension between content and form, as “There is a genre forbidden to the preface – it is the aphorism” (AF 20). The prefatory and the architectural – the metaphysical – imply systematicity, laws, legitimisation, authority, order, points of entry to that which can be inhabited, that is, made present (to itself), known, understood, intellectually possessed. In opposition to this is the aphorism, which “One never enters or leaves ...; it has therefore neither beginning nor end, neither foundation nor end, neither up nor down, neither inside nor outside” (AF 11). The aphorism, always in a state of reworking, always waiting for another step, does not exist as an aphorism as such. Despite its appearance as axiomatic truth it has no univocal meaning; its serial position means that it is always in a state of flux. Hence the aphorism has to be left on the threshold, as “Architecture does not tolerate the aphorism” (AF 11).

⁵⁶Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) xi.

And yet “There is nothing more architectural than a pure aphorism” (AF 43). In its (seeming) autonomy the aphorism is dogmatic, a self-legitimising, self-supporting structure which “reassembles in itself, arranges the foreword, the project, the master of the work and the putting to work” (AF 44). The preface – explanation, justification and authorisation of a book – is always disordered; placed first it was written last, and thus disrupts logical, progressive order.⁵⁷ The architectural is at its most authoritative when it revokes the traditional demands of the edifice, “when it does everything to save itself [*faire économie*] a structural demonstration” (AF 43). Thus the systematic is contaminated by, or hyphenated to, the asystematic. Hence the aphorism exists, if and when it does, to proclaim: “This is not an aphorism” (AF 21). An aphorism is never wholly self-present, it is never singular, it is not what it is, it is always less than or more than itself; a point, a plan, a preface, a project, a problem. It both promises and perjures, a performative that is also a constative, a plan of itself enacting itself.

The serial (il)logic of the fragment is such that each “aphorism in the series can come before or after the other, before *and* after the other – and in the other series” (AC 9). Each aphorism is centre of a series and the border of (another) series, the death knell and morning bell for every other aphorism, and the fragmentary thus introduces a spatial and temporal exigency. This is the confusion of time and lineage of “Envois”: as Socrates inherits from Plato and Plato inherits from Socrates there is always “the one in the other, the one in front of the other, the one after the other, the one behind the other” (E 19). Each fragment is before and after every other fragment, and it is through this radical temporality that Romeo and Juliet, as Derrida argues in “Aphorism Countertime”, can both impossibly die before the other *and* survive the other. Romeo sees the “dead” Juliet, and kills himself. Juliet awakens, sees the dead Romeo, and takes her own life. Thus, both see the other dead, both die before and after the other.⁵⁸ This is the “theatre of double survival” (AC 17), a theatre of ironic divided origins and ends.

⁵⁷ As Critchley notes, “the ‘Athenäum Fragments’ are *not* themselves fragments, they *should* not be fragments, they are merely indications or forewords for future fragments, promissory notes for an infinite work yet to be written” (*Very Little* 110). The post card fragments in “Envois” are, like Schlegel’s, promissory notes, and “the preface to a book I have not written” (E 3).

⁵⁸ Juliet’s death, it should be noted, is as real to Romeo as her eventual death after him is to the remaining characters.

The aphorism is of an impossible synchronisation, an “exemplary anachrony, the essential impossibility of any absolute synchronisation” (AC 11) – each aphorism is as separate and removed as (the dead) Juliet is from (the dead) Romeo. And yet the aphorism – and Romeo and Juliet – could not exist “without the promise of a now in common” (AC 13), a (paratactic) space in which and from which comparisons and conjunctions can be made.⁵⁹ Each aphorism is always in *contretemps*, in countertime or counterpoint.⁶⁰ Their relation is one of syncopation – a normally unaccented note is stressed, a usually unstressed beat is foregrounded, and the regular flow of the tempo is interrupted. Fragments interrupt (“normal”) rhythm, producing an off-beat, irregular time, a time out of joint.⁶¹ The term “syncopation” is also used in linguistics to denote the loss of unstressed sounds within a word; for example, “over” changed to “o’er”. Hence while syncopation interrupts it also conjoins, bringing together over an elided space.

Romeo and Juliet is a story of syncopated rhythm where the suppressed law of mishap and mischance takes sway. The “weaker” beat takes the lead, as all is lost when a letter, sent post-haste, misses its mark – *destinerrance*. As Romeo fails to hear that Juliet’s death is a simulation, it becomes real (for him), and the off-beat marks the time. Post-haste as speed – hasten the post, hasten the delivery – becomes post-haste as death – hasten the post, hasten the subsequent, hasten demise. Post-haste: speed after the fact, speed too late, speed that misses its time and brings the temporal exigency of the fragmentary to Romeo and Juliet. What “Envois” and *Romeo and Juliet* show is that the letter can always not arrive at its destination, and that the weaker beat can always be the stronger one. This “confounds a philosophical logic that would like accidents to remain what they are, accidental” (AC 12).

In *Romeo and Juliet* Derrida notes a coldness that freezes the play, a coldness which he terms

irony, the figure or rhetoric of irony, the *contretemps* of ironic consciousness. It always places itself disproportionately between the finite

⁵⁹ The multiple meanings of a signifier exist in a series with each other, “are ahead of or lag behind one another” (LO 94), and as such operate through fragmentation.

⁶⁰ Counterpoint is both a counter-point, an antithetical statement, and a (harmonious) relation between independent voices. It is a working in unison and a working against.

⁶¹ When Martin Hägglund writes that “time itself is constitutively out of joint. Or more exactly: time itself is the impossibility of any ‘itself’” (*Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008) 79), the exigency he is naming is that of fragmentary time.

and the infinite, it makes use of inadequation, of aphorism, it *speculates*, it analyses and analyses, it analyses the law of disidentification, the implacable necessity, the machine of the proper name that obliges me to live through precisely that, in other words, my name, of which I am dying. (AC 33)

While Derrida specifies that the irony in question is “the rhetorical sense of the figure of irony: conveying the opposite of what one says” (AC 36), the disorder that this structure produces is the irony of parataxis and parabasis. This is an irony of opposites, of analysis, negotiation and speculation – examination, contemplation, anticipation, theorisation, risks and profit, a game of cards. It is the abyss between each singular use, and the infinite potentiality of each singularity. It is an event of mechanical (im)possibility, of laws and counterlaws, conjunctions and dislocations, engagement and disengagement. It is the “Irony of the aphorism” (AC 37), of the double and divided law of the fragmentary, in which first and last, single and multiple, life and death, in time and out of time become conjoined. Always singular and plural, always fragments, the “aphorism *lives on* [survit], it lives much longer than its present and it lives longer than life” (AC 14). It lives on border lines, it gives and delays death.

The irony of the aphorism, the irony of illogical seriality and temporal exigency, is, for Derrida, the “Irony of the proper name” (AC 34). The subject is hyphenated to her name; it is other to her, it preceded her and will outlive her, and yet it places her, names her, *is* her.⁶² “Romeo would not be what he is, a stranger to his name, without this name” (AC 24). Romeo’s identity is inescapably tied to his name – he might tear the word but it remains – and yet he is stranger to his marker, as the “name is only a title, and the title is not the thing that it names” (AC 26).⁶³ The irony of the aphorism is the structural, syncopated irony of the

⁶² Against the feminine neuter as used in this thesis is the importance of the son as bearer of the family name. “Paradox, irony, reversal of the common law?” (AC 138): the fact that Juliet asks Romeo to give up his name, but, against common practice, no mention is made of her giving up hers. But, as Derrida writes, it is important that the son keep the name of the father, not important that the daughter does. Hence Juliet’s insistence that Romeo free himself – themselves – from the war of the names.

⁶³ As the centre/border of a shifting series, the aphorism is both title and text, that is, title to its own text, text to its own title. Each aphorism operates therefore as a titleless text and/or textless title. As centre to the series it entitles the series, *and* is the series’ (main) text. As border to the series it entitles the series *and* is the series’ (main) text. The title in general is a “literary fiction” that seeks “to produce political effects and change conventions, to legitimise or de-legitimise, to constitute, through its very irony, a new right” (MF 115). The title is a promise/perjury. For a title with a particularly ironic relation to itself and its text see Derrida’s “Title (to be specified)”, in which the text is titleless, and yet titled by a title that delays its own arrival and postpones its own legitimacy, and therefore that of the text.

name, which labels without comprising, which interrupts while presenting. Under Derrida's pen even rhetorical irony becomes the never quite what it is, and always something other, a structural irony of counterpoint and contretemps.

Parabolic Quotation

In 1899 Alcanter de Brahm suggested that a mark resembling an upside down, inverted question mark be used to indicate irony.⁶⁴ The problems such a mark would cause are obvious, and unsurprisingly it was abandoned. This section proposes, however, that a punctuation mark already exists that, while not denoting irony, *performs* the mode of ironic fragmentation outlined in this chapter. *Quotation marks*. Quotation marks anacoluthically interrupt, as the syntax of the sentence carrying the quotation suddenly changes, not through grammatical inaccuracy, but through the insertion of a wholly different passage torn from a wholly different syntax. The interruption/conjunction that they affect and denote is radically ambiguous, however, and as such quotation marks become punctuation points signalling a general complication or paradox.

Quotations marks indicate the immediacy of direct speech, and the distance of the cited words of an other. They refer to a specific speech act and to a general, popular turn of phrase. They frequently signify that the lexeme in question is not an active member of a sentence, grammatically extant from the functioning of the syntax that is built around it – mentioned rather than used. They demonstrate that the word in question is inadequate, insufficient, imperfect. They reveal that while an expression may have a “proper” sense, this instance isn't it. They hint that the utterance, for a number of possible reasons, should be treated with caution and questioned. Quotation marks demarcate, but what they mark and why is haunted by ambiguity. They fragment, their delimitations an ironic transgression of limits. For Derrida these marks punctuate a discourse where use and mention are no longer rigorously defined, where inside and outside is destabilised, each use a quotation of old words by another *and* a new use by the self. Marks of ironic conjunction and interruption, signifying in antithetical ways, they ironically fragment discourse, not only with visible points, but with “invisible quotation marks, even within a word” (LO 148).

⁶⁴ Booth 55.

In “Some Statements and Truisms” Derrida describes the proliferation of quotation marks in our works and in our speech as a “general irony” (ST 75) that renders everything a mention rather than a use. Against this general, postmodern irony, he posits “events of writing whose force nevertheless consists in ‘using’ language again, but in ‘using’ language again by submitting it to the effects of deconstruction, that is, without reconstituting what is being deconstituted and thus without giving up the quotation marks” (ST 75). Thus Derrida presents what this thesis has called a *parabatic irony*:

another writing of the quotation marks themselves, which, being doubly vigilant, being doubly in quotation marks and redoubling the quotation marks in an inventive way, destabilises even the opposition between discourse *with* and discourse *without* quotation marks, mention and use, and the entire system of associated values; that is, philosophy in its entirety, theory in its entirety. (ST 75)

Language does not descend into mere mention, but transgresses the limits between use and mention. It operates *beyond* the marks *within* the marks, becoming an ironic literature of edges transposed and limits overstepped. Thus quotation marks are ironic “hooks that unhook”, “pliers or cranes ... that grab in order to loosen the grasp” (P 9).⁶⁵

Quotation marks do not simply surround a phrase, emphasising its self-contained isolation, but “divide it, rework its body and its insides, until it is distended, diverted, out of joint, then reset [it] member by member, word by word, realigned in the most diverse configurations” (LO 63). Quotation marks suspend a phrase, placing it out of grasp and yet underfoot. They fragment inside *and* outside their limits, turning the edge in on itself, revealing an internal, hyphenated abyss. If “a text quotes and requotes, with or without quotation marks, when it is written on the brink, you start, or indeed have already started, to lose your footing. You lose sight of any line of demarcation between a text and what is outside it” (LO 67).

Blanchot’s *The Madness of the Day* is a radical example of this absence of the totalised and separate. Derrida describes the *récit* as

⁶⁵ This image is found too in *Spurs*, where Derrida describes quotation marks as “the screeching machinations of a hooker, or crane (*grue*), its flight and clapping claws” (S 57). Nicholas Royle also refers to “the tweezers of quotation marks” which show, he argues, “a characteristic sense of irony and comedy” in Derrida (“Derrida’s Event”, *Derrida’s Legacies: Literature and Philosophy* ed. Simon Glendinning and Robert Eaglestone (London: Routledge, 2008) 39).

quotations, quotations of requotations with no original performance, [as] there is no speech act not already the iteration of another, no circle and no quotation marks to reassure us about the identity, opposition, or distinction of speech events. The part is always greater than the whole, the edge of the set [*ensemble*] is a fold [*pli*] in the self. (LO 79-80)

The line with which *The Madness of the Day* appears to begin is quoted at the end of the narrative in such a way as to throw the originality of the first usage into doubt – does the second instance quote the first, or does the first instance prefiguratively quote the latter?⁶⁶ In the case of such a structure the text is deprived of any beginning, and any edge or border. As Derrida writes, “It is impossible to say which quotes the other, and above all which one forms the border of the other. Each includes the other, comprehends the other, which is to say that neither comprehends the other” (LO 82). Edges thus become interiors, which causes “an essential *unfinishedness* that cannot be reduced to an incompleteness or an inadequacy” (LO 85), an unfinished of the fragmentary as it always awaits a further fragment, a further reworking.

The general parabolic irony that Derrida proposes does not reduce language to a stagnant, eventless referentiality. The destabilisation of the limits between use and mention enables the performative production of a new event, as in quoting one is no longer citing a predecessor but producing a *paleonym*, a new use of an old term. Or, more radically, a *neologism*, a wholly new term:

One is thus inaugurating another word, in sum, a homonym that must be put forward cautiously between quotation marks. Another word-concept is thus staged whose event one causes to come about. The quotation marks signal in this case that one is citing only oneself at the moment of this invention or this convention, in a gesture that is as inaugural as it is arbitrary. (WA 76)

In producing a new use, one is no longer citing an other, but also citing oneself. Thus, through what Derrida termed the irony of the signature, the text, full of visible and invisible quotation marks, becomes a work on and of the self.

But quotation marks also protect, so that cited phrases preserve the singularity of their first use and remain untouchable. The more they are reworked, the more commentary imposed upon them, the further they retreat, and the more

⁶⁶ And we return to “*With the word with begins then this text*” (see chapter two).

aphoristic and uninhabitable they become. On Celan, witnessing and bearing witness, Derrida writes that we cite knowing that we do not know; we know neither the poem nor what it is to bear witness (to the poem). Hence Derrida repeats and repeats the lines from Celan's "*Aschenglorie*" "*Niemand/ zeugt für den/ Zeugen*" (No-one/ bears witness for/ the witness) while never coming closer to them. Quotation marks preserve and alter, point to the self and the other, to alterity and singularity, to a citation of the self and a citation of the other, to an old use used anew, and a new use immediately old. They operate with the complexity and difference of irony, hooking and unhooking, rendering inhabitable and uninhabitable, touchable and untouchable. After Derrida's ironic step we can no longer "be confident in the law of quotation marks" (E 98).

The parabolic step that transgresses limits in citation can be found in the dividing line that is the *genre*. The genre demands respect for norms and demarcations, and guards against "impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity" (LG 57). But what, Derrida asks, if there were, deep within the law of genre, "a law of impurity or a principle of contamination? And suppose the condition for the possibility of law were the *a priori* of a counter-law, an axiom of impossibility that would confound its sense, order, and reason" (LG 57). Suppose that we are dealing with a force of irony, that turns a law around to include or be predicated on its opposite, that reveals that the thesis rests on the antithetical. Derrida begins "The Law of Genre" with three statements – "a fragmentary discourse" (LG 55) – that can be read as constative or performative propositions. But very quickly we see that the "line or trait that seemed to separate the two bodies of interruption is affected *straight away* by an essential disruption" (LG 57). That which allows us to differentiate, the law of genre, is rendered open by "a counter-law that constitutes this very law, renders it possible, conditions it and thereby renders it impossible" (LG 58). The title of a genre, the genre-mark, is not of the genre it designates. Consider then, writes Derrida, the "paradox, consider the irony (which is irreducible to a consciousness or an attitude): this supplementary and distinctive trait, a mark of belonging or inclusion, does not properly pertain to any genre or class" (LG 64-65). A deep, structural irony – not rhetorical, not based on intention or effect – is in operation, an irony of counterlaw within the law, an irony of thesis and antithesis. This irony means that the mark of a genre both allows a genre to be, gives it a name, a place, a title, and prevents it from fully being: "The clause or

flood-gate of genre declasses what it allows to be classed. It tolls the knell of genealogy or of genericity, which it, however, also brings forth to the light of day” (LG 65). The law – counterlaw – of genre is such that it “*makes the statement of belonging an ironical exercise*. It interrupts the very belonging of which it is a necessary condition” (LO 71-72). In a movement similar to that of Schlegel’s alternating self-creation and self-destruction the mark puts to death that which it engenders, although Derrida’s formulation is a structural principle of a law and counter law, a possibility and impossibility. The mark of belonging does not belong, and the law of genre is “a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy” (LG 59).

Incomprehensibility to Impossibility, Transcendence to Transgression

For Schlegel, Blanchot and Derrida incomprehensibility is an important structure within the text. As Derrida explains; “one does not always write with a desire to be understood ... there is a paradoxical desire not to be understood” (TS 30). Complete transparency robs the text of a future as its univocity closes it – its survival depends on a degree of non-acquaintance between the reader and the text, on an excess that allows future contexts to remain open. When the text remains open through a certain unintelligibility a kenosis occurs, a self-emptying stemming from the lack of self-presence, self-contemporaneity, and self-totalisation. It is a making room for the other, a giving over to the other. Despite, however, the space which *incomprehensibility* gives to the other, an analysis of the text in this way remains predicated on the centrality of the subject, that is, on an author or reader who is not in control of language.⁶⁷ Of greater importance then are the structural and logical *impossibilities* that Derrida and Blanchot see in the text.

Deconstruction “might perhaps be ‘the experience of the impossible’” (PM 81) – the impossible is that which enables an event to arrive.⁶⁸ Impossibility as a condition of possibility is best understood through the word *perhaps*, where the “experience of the ‘perhaps’ would be that of *both* the possible *and* the impossible,

⁶⁷ Schlegel thought of the work in terms of its incomprehensibility, that is, in relation to a subject’s ability to understand it. No text is ever fully comprehensible, he argued, and nor should it be. However, it should be noted that he did not conceive of the reader as a structure in the text – of primary interest was the relation between the work and author.

⁶⁸ Derek Attridge gives a useful overview of Derrida’s uses of the impossible in *Reading and Responsibility: Deconstruction’s Traces* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010) 60.

of the possible *as impossible*” (PM 74). If what arises is already possible and hence capable of being anticipated and predicted, it is not an event. An event is only possible when it cannot be calculated, when it contains something of chance and of the “perhaps”. The impossible is therefore the “perhaps” which resists and exceeds expectations and that, by being unforeseen, paradoxically allows the event to be. “When the impossible *makes itself* possible, the event takes place (possibility *of* the impossible). ... For an event to take place, for it to be possible, it has to be, as event, as invention, the coming of the impossible” (PM 90). The impossible and the perhaps, “far from breaking off the question, gives it room to breathe” (PM 74).⁶⁹ Outside of expectation, the impossible exceeds knowledge and introduces the aporia that is necessary for an event to arrive. The impossible is then the interruption of the possible that allows it to occur, the deviant and deviating parabolic step away from the suffocating inertia of inevitability. From “the very heart of the im-possible, one would thus hear the impulse or pulse of a ‘deconstruction’” (PM 91). While the incomprehensible allows the text to survive through its excess, it is the impossibility of literature that preserves it as possibility.

Blanchot writes that what exceeds the system is

the impossibility of its failure and likewise the impossibility of its success. Ultimately nothing can be said of it, and there is a way of keeping still (the lacunary silence of writing), that halts the system, leaving it idle, delivered to the seriousness of irony. (ED 47)

In Derrida’s work the system is that which strives for a “totalisation in the configuration, a continuity of all statements” (TS 3), despite the presence of what deconstruction recognises as an (ironic) “force of dislocation, a limit in the totalisation, a limit in the movement of syllogistic synthesis” (TS 4). The system is (partly) composed of that which is other to the system, as is the case in Hegelian dialectics, which is composed of a thesis, and that which is other to the thesis, the antithesis. Thus in the dialectic of dialectics we therefore have the dialectical and the non-dialectical, where the “non” is itself split between that which dialectically opposes, and the “non” that is radically heterogeneous and irreducible to the oppositional structure. It is the presence of the heterogeneous –

⁶⁹ The impossible is an urgency, Derrida writes in *Rogues*, that “cannot be *idealised* any more than the other as other can. This im-possible is thus not a (regulative) *idea* or *ideal*” (R 84).

“*that which does not even oppose*” (TS 33) – that makes dialectising impossible, that makes it consist of a process of “dialectising the non-dialectisable” (TS 32). Hence we have “a concept of dialectics that is no longer the conventional one of synthesis, conciliation, reconciliation, totalisation, identification with itself; now, on the contrary, we have a negative or infinite dialectic that is the movement of synthesising without synthesis” (TS 33). This negative dialectic is a process of ex-appropriation, the *nec plus ultra* of dialectics that cannot be assimilated into dialectics as it does not oppose. There thus exists in the system that which is other to the system, that renders the system (im)possible, and means that synthesis is always predicated on a lack.

For Blanchot and Derrida we do not transcend so much as transgress – we take the parabolic step/not that, in crossing, does not give rise to another limit, but reveals that the limit, already crossed, also remains uncrossable: “the limit, in as much uncrossable, summons to cross, affirms the desire (the false step) that has always already ... crossed the line” (SB 24). For Derrida a “transcendent reading” is a reading that moves towards meaning, one which seeks to ground itself in determinability. It is the *nontranscendent* that transgresses, that is in excess of a thetic or direct relation between signifier and signified. The *non* of the nontranscendent is not a negation but a complication, a mark of alterity or a different step, as a “literature which forbade that transcendence would annul itself. This moment of ‘transcendence’ is irrepressible, but it can be complicated or folded” (SI 45). The nontranscendent takes the aporetic path, and has a

suspended relation to meaning and reference. *Suspended* means *suspense*, but also *dependence*, condition, conditionality. In its suspended condition, literature can only exceed itself. No doubt all language refers to something other than itself or to language as something other. (SI 48)

The excessive, transgressive nature of literature means that it “stands on the edge of everything, almost beyond everything, including itself” (SI 47), and is a threshold discourse, a border crossing. Thus Derrida speaks of the text that recognises itself to be fragmented, a paratactic hyphenation,

a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces. Thus the text overruns all limits assigned to it so far (not submerging or drowning then in an

undifferentiated homogeneity, but rather making them more complex, dividing and multiplying strokes and lines) – all the limits. (LO 69)

Poematic Strophes

For a 1988 issue the Italian journal *Poesia* asked Derrida to answer the question with which each of their issues began: “*Che cos’è la poesia?*” – what is, or rather, what thing, is poetry?⁷⁰ Against the direct, thetic question that heralds the death of poetry and “salutes the birth of prose” (CC 237), Derrida presents an apostrophe written to an informal *tu*, an event, which does not (simply) engage with the technical details of the meaning or “essence” of poetry, but performs a presentation and demonstration of the singular “poematic”, “this thing which in the same stroke exposes itself to death and protects itself” (CC 229).⁷¹ In “Shibboleth” Derrida writes that “To create a work is give a new body to language, to give language a body so that this truth of language may appear *as such*, may appear and disappear, may appear as an elliptic withdrawal” (SQ 106). In “*Che cos’è la poesia?*” Derrida gives to the poematic the body of the *hérisson*, *istrice*, hedgehog, a fragment of life that turns in on itself, an animal of chance hidden under the false protection of its spines, whose relation to itself exposes it to death and disaster.⁷²

“*Che cos’è la poesia?*” is a manifesto and a performance, a prose poem enacting the life and death (drive) of the poematic. It is excessive and impenetrable and beautiful, an overturning of the methodological, systematic or propositional as, like the poematic, Derrida’s essay “never gathers itself together, rather it loses itself and gets off the track” (CC 233). It answers – elliptically – the dictated question, it presents, in translation(s), a piece on the impossibility of translation.⁷³ It also instigates its own performative problems – in presenting a singular, poetic response to a general, thetic question, Derrida tempts the reader to (re)formulate his poematic into a poetics. Despite its difficulty, the aleatory roll of

⁷⁰ Although Derrida doesn’t directly address it, immediately we engage with titles and aphorisms and the quotation of titles: “poesia” is both poetry and the name of the journal.

⁷¹ In “Psyche” Derrida links the apostrophe and the parabasis as the detour of direct address (PI 17).

⁷² One wonders if Derrida was thinking of Schopenhauer’s hedgehog, also used by Freud, and usually referred to in the context of the “Hedgehog’s Dilemma”. In the cold, a group of hedgehogs want to huddle together to keep warm, but know that coming in contact with each other will cause mutual pain.

⁷³ The essay was originally published with the French and Italian side by side. However, translation does not simply refer to the move between languages.

the hedgehog is all too easily systematised into a general theory of poetry. The prediction/imperative – “You will call poem from now on a certain passion of the singular mark, the signature that repeats its dispersion, each time beyond the logos” (CC 235) – is both performed and interrupted, as while one attempts to address each work singularly, the paths of approach are in danger of being mapped onto a programme or method.

Derrida’s poematic is “the aleatory rambling of a trek, the strophe, that turns but never leads back to discourse, or back home” (CC 225). Each strophe, each turn, is an apostrophe, a catastrophe, a *metastrophe* – a radical change or transformation that turns away from circularity so that there is neither infinite repetition of the same nor totalising completion. The turning that occurs in this text is, despite Derrida’s protestations, a turning with and from Schlegel. The poematic is neither process nor product, neither *poiesis* nor work. It is an aleatory reworking, an assortment of paratactic phrases that manifest a desire to be rather than to represent. But in so being it makes no claims to the literary absolute: it is the ironic hyphenation and contamination of the “absolute nonabsolute” (CC 239-31). Its drive to be without support is a drive to not be, its life drive a death drive. It is not the work of the self but a dictation from the other, and as such no subject-(non)work but *alterity-text*, where the irony of the signature signs self to other and other to self. It is phrase learned by heart, (in) fragments, the ruin of a totality that never existed, the citation of – dictation from – a non-original yet singular source.

Derrida’s answer to the question “What thing is poetry?” predates the asking; in the 1984 text “Shibboleth” he writes that “the poem speaks beyond knowledge. It writes, and what it writes is, above all, precisely this: that it is addressed and destined beyond knowledge” (SQ 34). A poem is in excess of the thetic and systematic, and so, in “*Che cos’è*” Derrida proposes that in order to approach the poem one must “set fire to the library of poetics” (CC 233).⁷⁴ The poem cannot be made subject to propositional knowledge; an anonymous fragment, it calls for itself to be “disfigured, transfigured or rendered indeterminate in its *port*” (CC 227) – port of origin in the author *and* its destination in the reader. Rather than the permanent becoming of Schlegel’s

⁷⁴ A poem will always offer a poetics, a theory of itself. “But not with the idea of applying a previously existing art of writing, or of referring to one as a charter written somewhere else” (SQ 65-66). The methodical reference library and the general rules of systematic, formalised approach must be burned to make way for singular reading, negotiation or invention of the text.

romantic poetry, the poematic is a permanent *coming*, the postponed appearance of (saturated) meaning and determinability. Always the “advent of an event” (CC 227), its origins recede into the theatre of irony, and it rolls not teleologically forward but across and across the road.⁷⁵ The poematic is thus ironic negotiation between the finite event of experience and the infinite coming of other events. This excess spawns a multitude of commentary, but the poetic will always elude exegetical prose.

The poematic desires to be singular and untranslatable; like Schlegel’s and Blanchot’s fragments it longs to exist rather than represent, to *be*, “without external support, without substance, without subject, absolute of writing in (it)self” (CC 237). It thus urges the reader to “destroy me, or rather render my support invisible to the outside ... do what must be done so that the provenance of the mark remains from now on unlocatable and unrecognisable” (CC 227). In reading the text we both preserve and destroy it – by reading and assimilating we annihilate its alterity and reduce its potential. The poematic resists translation, resists exegesis, resists repetition but at the same time needs it in order to exist – to be read. Hence it “Reiterate(s) in a murmur: never repeat” (CC 233). Hence the desire of the poematic: translate me but don’t translate me, let me be in language and yet beyond it.

The logic of Derrida’s hedgehog is an ironic counterlogic of the within/beyond, and it is hard not to immediately hear a citation of Schlegel’s *Igel* (hedgehog). “A fragment,” wrote Schlegel, “like a miniature work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a hedgehog” (A 206). But, Derrida insists, and again the misreading of Schlegel’s fragments is clear, his hedgehog has none of the totality of Schlegel’s. His creature “has no relation to itself – that is, no totalising individuality – that does not expose it even more to death and to being-torn-apart” (P 303). It does not gather itself together in strength, but in vulnerability. Its name is a nickname, a “name beyond a name” (CC 235), a catachresis, improper and yet defining, a name and a description: hedgehog. Poematic. This improperly titled fragment does not emphasise *poiesis* or process as does Schlegel’s; instead “it *lets itself* be done, without activity, without work, in the most sober *pathos*, a stranger to all

⁷⁵ In “Psyche” Derrida writes that there is no invention without an advent, as “advent” means “the inauguration for the future of a *possibility* or of a *power* that will remain at the disposal of everyone” (PI 5-6).

production, especially to creation” (CC 233). It is not a moment of pure production, or pure poetry, but a contamination, an accident, a catastrophe.⁷⁶ It is just a hedgehog rolled up on the road, an animal that, despite Derrida’s denials, is rolled up like a fragment: “turned toward the other and toward itself” (CC 235).

The poematic is a (singular) dictation: “I am *a* dictation, pronounces poetry, learn me by heart, copy me down” (CC 223).⁷⁷ The citation of the words of an other, the poematic is learnt by heart, assimilated and internalised, a process which appears to represent “pure interiority, independent spontaneity, the freedom to affect oneself actively by reproducing the beloved trace” (CC 231). However, it also represents exteriority and “the laws of mnemotechnics” (CC 231), and as such poematic dictation is a writing on the soul; absolute immediacy, interiority, and instinct signified through the mechanical, the technical, the external, constructed and automatic. As a dictation the poematic is ironic citation, a new use and an old mention, the “by heart” a metaphor for fragmentary relations: internal and external, a shifting centre. We recite and repeat and re-cite in order to assimilate precisely because we do not and cannot understand: the poem cannot be reduced to a thetic object of knowledge. “The reciting compulsion, the ‘by heart’ desire, stems from this limit to intelligibility or transparency of meaning” (SQ 87).

As Catherine Malabou writes, “The ‘by heart’ is the breaking in of the outside into the inside of the heart”.⁷⁸ The heart, the centre, which creates the subject through the grammatical *I*, is no longer interior but a contaminated, transgressed interior/exterior. Thus “A poem, I never sign(s) it. The other sign(s). The *I* is only at the coming of this desire: to learn by heart” (CC 237). Poetry occurs not as the subject produces, but as the subject is transcribed from the

⁷⁶ Describing the “pure poem”, while also asserting that it does not exist, Derrida writes in “Shibboleth”: “the impossibility of what which, each time only once, has meaning only by having no meaning, no ideal or general meaning, or has meaning only so as to invoke, in order to betray them, the concept, law, or genre – is the pure poem” (SQ 11).

⁷⁷ In *The Gift of Death* Derrida, reading Matthew, writes that the truth that God rewards those who sacrifice is a truth to be

‘learned by heart’ in the first place because one has the impression of having to learn it without understanding it, like a repeated and repeatable formula. ... It is a matter of learning ‘by heart’ beyond any semantic comprehension. ... But we say ‘to be learned by heart’ for another reason. This passage is also a mediation or sermon on the heart, on what the heart is and more precisely what it *should be* should it return to its rightful place. (GD 97)

That which is learned by heart is absorbed or assimilated rather than understood – it goes straight to the heart, and as such is the ethical or responsible action of “doing before understanding”.

⁷⁸ Malabou 262.

dictation of the other. Creation is thus reception.⁷⁹ For Derrida the work, the poematic, is not Schlegel's subject-(non)work, but an alterity-text, a text of radical, ironic possibility and difference that, through the irony of the signature, is also a writing of the (alterity within the) self.

Schlegel presents the literary absolute: production and theory of production. Derrida describes the origin of the poetic as the "absolute nonabsolute"; that which is absolutely nonabsolute, monstrous and contaminated, parabolically transgressing the borders and boundaries of limitation itself. Without origin, without form, without genre, without archive, the absolute of writing, as Derrida posits it, is the *absolute nonabsolute*, a state of (counter)law, and ironic, parabolic contamination.

Literally: you would like to retain by heart an absolutely unique form, an event whose intangible singularity no longer separates the ideality, the ideal meaning as one says, from the body of the letter. In the desire of this absolute inseparation, the absolute nonabsolute, you breathe the origin of the poetic. (CC 229-31)

The poematic desires to be ideal and to be real, to be itself and the idea of itself, the perfect form of itself, ideally nonideal, literally nonliteral. It wishes to be absolutely singular and learned by heart. In the drive to be absolutely inseparable, a moment of absolute ironic hyphenation, it is both "vulnerable and dangerous" (CC 233), force and weakness, law and counterlaw.

If the absolute is that which is self-referential, unconditional, complete in itself and inwardly focused, the nonabsolute is contingent, conditional and inseparable from the other. However, the choice of the prefix *non* should be noted as setting up an opposition to the absolute that is in excess of opposition: *non* is both opposition *and* irreducibility. It is therefore the other against which the absolute can be defined, and that which is heterogeneous to definition and comparison – wholly other. Thus nonabsolute, in being both the *notabsolute* and *aabsolute* doubly stresses both its alterity and its inseparability, its hyphenation. The hyphenation of the nonabsolute denotes referral without completion, a referral always to the other. The absolute nonabsolute is that which in referring to the other beyond refers infinitely to itself, and relates to itself as other, to itself

⁷⁹ The injunction to "learn by heart" is also extended to the reader, who becomes a structure in the text. "*Che cos'è la poesia?*" is an apostrophe directed to a reader who is external and (structurally) internal. Despite Schlegel's love for symphilosophy, for him the reader is always just receiver.

through alterity. Its inseparability from the other is the drive to be in alterity *and* to extinguish alterity, to relate to itself through singular alterity such that it ceases to be. The desire for the absolute nonabsolute is as such a wish for ironic contamination, for a catastrophe, for a law that is predicated on an antithetical counterlaw (of autoimmunity), a protection that endangers, a self that is other, a presence without presence, an excess without essence, an event without event.

Importantly, the ironic hyphenation that occurs between the two terms of the phrase is found within the terms themselves, so each term is a priori complicit in the other (term). The absolute, centred on itself, is itself and example of itself, itself and other. The absolute is thus a priori nonabsolute. The nonabsolute, centred on the other contains and refers to everything through the other and as other, and therefore acquires a certain completion. The absolute nonabsolute, interruption and conjunction, is ironic hyphenation, a parabolic transgression of limits, a de-limitation. As Clark writes:

Identity-to-self, as a structure of auto-affection, is necessarily constituted through otherness in a movement that prevents subjectivity being conceived except nonabsolutely, as an impure difference, touched with a radical finitude. ... The poetic is the interruption or injunction that, dislocating the notion of subjectivity as presence-to-self, is an experience of finitude; a *syncope*.⁸⁰

A syncope – syncopation – the loss of sounds, a gap or interruption of a word, an off-beat within the rhythm, is the fragmentation of the subject and the change from the poem to the poematic. Against Schlegel's production and progression is an infinite finitude, an open closure, and subject-(non)work becomes alterity-text. The poematic is thus ironic, parabolic poetry, a permanent interruption and conjunction, a transgression of its own limits. It is an aporetic poetry, turning towards new paths and new limits while reworking limitation.

⁸⁰ Timothy Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997) 265.

(Ir)Responsibility and Irony: Levinas and Ethical Language

Introduction

After Levinas, writes Blanchot, to converse

is not only to turn away from saying what, thanks to language, *is* – the presence of a presence. To converse is also to turn language away from itself, maintaining it outside of all unity, outside even of the unity of that which is. To converse is to divert language from itself by letting itself differ and defer, answering with an always already to a never yet. (ED 34-35)

This chapter addresses the diverted, interrupted conversation between Derrida and Levinas on language as response to alterity and the other. It steps up to “the response of responsibility” (OB 142), to the modes of language and engagement that are responsible, or, perhaps better, *(ir)responsible*. (Ir)responsibility is, as Critchley puts it, “my experience of a claim or demand that I both cannot fully meet and cannot avoid”.¹ It is, Catherine Malabou writes, “a responsibility without a program, a responsibility that doesn’t believe in the response, if by ‘response’ one intends an axiomatic evidence”: an (ir)responsibility that is “eminently aporetic”.² The ethical, or (ir)responsible, relation

is expressed linguistically or articulated philosophically by recourse to an ethical language that has a paradoxical relation to that which it is attempting to thematise. ... [It] is a question of trying to say that which cannot be said, or proposing that which cannot be propositionally stated, of enunciating that which cannot be enunciated, and what has to be said, stated or enunciated is subjectivity itself.³

This requires a writing that singularly presents the self only to erase the self before the other, a *perverformative without a present* that signifies an obligation without origin. It requires a writing of interruption, a permanent parabasis that fragments the self.

This chapter does not try to present a prescriptive formula for Derrida’s ironic (ir)responsibility or Levinas’s “ethics of ethics”. Instead it outlines the

¹ Simon Critchley, *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (London: Verso, 2009) 66.

² Malabou 249.

³ Critchley, *Ethics-Politics* 185.

specifics of how and why the ethical or responsible content of Derrida's and Levinas's texts is ironic, and is approached through an ironic use of language. It does not argue that either theorist deliberately espouses an opaque or evasive style simply to allow the other to sign, but that their writings contain very careful and specific knots, faults, repetitions and interruptions that step away from the thematic and prescriptive. For Levinas this is in order to respond to the other without constraining or reducing her otherness; in Derrida this is complicated by a further explication of the double binds of engagements with otherness and alterity. The chapter ends with a reading of the impossibilities of obligation and responsibilities – impossibilities that only serve to increase their urgencies – performed in the final fragment of “At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am” (1980).

A Deconstructive Ethics?

Deconstruction, Derrida has repeatedly argued, has always been engaged with what can be termed, *hesitantly*, the ethical. Hesitantly, because if the ethical is a system of immediately applicable propositions and descriptions, then deconstruction does not contain an ethics. Hesitantly, because if deconstruction is not a method, then it can never be an ethical or moral method to apply to life or to a text. J. Hillis Miller describes ethics as containing a necessary authoritative prescription: “I *must* do this; I *cannot do otherwise*, and I *ought* not to do otherwise”.⁴ While deconstruction does embrace the *il faut*, the “one must”, it embraces an obligation without procedure, offering no rules, no comprehensive, systemic laws that supply normative, constative decrees. As John D. Caputo writes in *Against Ethics*,

Deconstruction issues a warning that the road ahead is still under construction, that there is blasting and the danger of falling rocks. Ethics, on the other hand, hands out maps which lead us to believe that the road is finished and there are superhighways all along the way.⁵

⁴ J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987) 47.

⁵ John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993) 4.

Bennington is even more direct: “Deconstruction cannot propose an ethics. ... Ethics is metaphysical through and through and can therefore never simply be assumed or affirmed in deconstruction. The demand or desire for a ‘deconstructive ethics’ is in this sense doomed to be disappointed”.⁶

In *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* Derrida writes, via Levinas, that ethical language “does not come from an ethical intervention laid out over descriptions. It is the very meaning of approach, which contrasts with knowing” (AE 52). If the writings of Levinas and Derrida are ethical, then the ethics they contain is far from a standard prescriptive system. It is the non-ethical opening of ethics, an (ir)responsible parabolic stepping up which lends itself to a political or juridical content determined only

beyond knowledge, beyond all presentation, all concepts, all possible intuition, in a singular way, in the speech and the responsibility *taken* by each person, in each situation, and on the basis of analysis that is each time unique – unique and infinite, unique but *a priori* exposed to substitution, unique and yet general, interminable in spite of the urgency of the decision. (AE 115)

Pure ethics, Derrida writes,

begins with the respectable dignity of the other as the absolute *unlike*, recognised as nonrecognisable, indeed as unrecognisable, beyond all knowledge, all cognition and all recognition: far from being the beginning of pure ethics, the neighbour as like or as resembling, as looking like, spells the end or the ruin of such an ethics, if there is any. (R 60)

“Ethics”, as deconstruction recognises it, does not force the other into a system of universally applicable rules and regulations, but begins in the heterogeneity of the other and the impossibility of containing that alterity within general prescriptive decrees.

Deconstructive “ethics”, deconstructive responsibility, “consists in not providing ready-made *responses* for a problem, not transforming the promise or imminence of the wholly other into a calculable program”.⁷ Responsibility lies in the seeming irresponsibility of deconstructing intentionality, freedom, will, conscience, consciousness, subject, community and decision (FL 248). It is found

⁶ Bennington, *Interrupting* 34.

⁷ Malabou 239.

in the knowledge that a good act performed leaves other good acts undone, and that the other who is welcomed may or may not be worthy of that welcome. Responsibility, a banal word before Levinas, argues Blanchot, is that which separates me from myself, and requires “that I answer for the impossibility of being responsible” (ED 25). If my attempt to act responsibly towards the other suppresses or denies the other her singular alterity, then I do not act responsibly. If my approach to the other signals a retreat from an *other* other, then I do not act responsibly. “Responsibility is irresponsibility”, writes Miller, “and irresponsibility is responsibility, in a whirling that boggles the mind, like being caught in a revolving door”.⁸ It is an endless, “spiralling movement” (OB 44), a responsibility in which “I can no longer appeal to any ethics, any experience, any practice whatever – save that of some counter-living, which is to say an un-practice, or (perhaps) a word of writing” (ED 26). Responsibility is the insufficiency and irresponsibility of each response, the step up that is always also a step away.⁹

If ethics is a thesis engraved on stone, then deconstruction’s (ir)responsible ethics is a poetics breathed out in (near) silence, an anachronous interruption. The silence of the non-response of the other

conditions my responsibility, there where I alone must respond. Without silence, without the hiatus, which is not the absence of rules but the necessity of a leap at the moment of ethical, political or juridical decision, we could simply unfold knowledge into a programme or course of action. Nothing could make us more irresponsible; nothing could be more totalitarian. (AE 117)

Responsibility is found in an aporetic, impossible commitment. As Derrida asks, “how does one assume a responsibility that announces itself as contradictory because it inscribes us from the very beginning of the game into a kind of necessarily double obligation, a double bind?” (TO 29) The interruption of paradoxical obligations is what allows responsibility to be, a responsibility that is each time a singular, performative reaction to the other. Responsibility forces one to impossibly commit oneself, promising oneself to two incompatible laws, to two

⁸ J. Hillis Miller, *For Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009) 214.

⁹ To pre-empt chapter six, one could argue that responsibility as Derrida describes it is autoimmune in relation to humanity – in helping one I effectively attack an other, each of my actions is always a protection and attack, a defence and an exposure.

contradictory demands.¹⁰ It demonstrates that what may seem open and ethical and legal and responsible – signing with one’s own name, taking legal responsibility for one’s own actions – is also an act of irresponsibility, as sometimes the most authentic signature is that of a pseudonym (GD 58).

If ethics is being at home, grounded in structure and architecture, then the ethics of Derrida and Levinas is a *homelessness*, whereby the subject’s house is the home of the other. As Derrida writes in *Altérités*, “To enter into a rapport with the other, interruption must be possible. The rapport must be a rapport of interruption. Here interruption does not interrupt the rapport with the other, it opens it”.¹¹ The subject’s obsession with the self must be turned outward towards the alterity of the other in order to render it ethically responsible. The step is thus a parabolic step, an ironic permanent parabasis of ethics.¹² The ethics of Levinas and Derrida is an ironic (ir)responsibility, an “ethics” interrupting ethics: a *beyond* ethics *within* ethics. (Ir)responsibility is a fragmentation of prescriptive ethics into singular engagements of (ir)responsibility. For Derrida and Levinas it is a force, structure and style that steps away from a system centred on the subject and up to alterity and the other.

Despite Derrida’s openly acknowledged debt to Levinas it is important not to conflate the two thinkers, different in their treatment of gender, literature, justice, politics, passivity, the decision and particularly in their use of the “other”.¹³ Most basic, perhaps, is that while the first relation for Levinas is the subject and other, for Derrida the “first” relation is always complicated by multiple responsibilities for others. Martin Hägglund forwards a persuasive

¹⁰ This position should not imply, as Derrida writes, that “in order to take an authentic responsibility it [is] necessary to limit oneself to impossible, impractical, and inapplicable decisions” (TO 45-46). What is required is a stepping between the unconditional and the conditional that analyses “the disparities between law, ethics, and politics, or between the unconditional idea of law (be it of men or of states) and the concrete conditions of its implementation” (TO 57). One must, to return to chapter one, negotiate.

¹¹ Jacques Derrida and Pierre-Jean Labarrière, *Altérités* (Paris: Éditions Osiris, 1986) 82, trans. and cited in Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) 31.

¹² Ethics, for de Man, is “the structural interference of two distinct value systems” (AO 206), the contamination or anacoluthic interruption of what is considered to be universally, absolutely true and what is considered necessary and right. These ethical prescriptions are deemed so “right” as to be “true”, but there is a perjury involved here, as what is right may not be true, and what is true may not be right. The ethical law is a law of reading or judging or interpreting – absolutely necessary but not demonstrably or unequivocally true. It has no basis outside itself, and as such is just and unjustified. It is bound up in a general impossibility of reading, or perhaps better, of the impossibility of ever finishing reading – there is always another fragment, always another mode to the anacoluthon, always another parabolic step.

¹³ See Attridge “Posthumous Infidelity” in *Reading and Responsibility*, and Bennington “Deconstruction and Ethics” in *Interrupting Derrida* for more.

argument against the conflation of Levinas's other with Derrida's other/alterity, arguing that while Levinas posits an other who is fundamentally good, Derrida's concept of alterity is inextricably bound up with violence.

Ethics as first philosophy presumes an originary peace, and is therefore a movement that moves the absolute other closer to an absolute, self-present, totalised Same. Levinas's face-to-face relation, argues Häggglund, is not with a human other but with the Good, and therefore with the same, not the unpredictable other. There is the (human) other and the absolute other that is God or the Good – the latter is present as a trace in the encounter with the human face. Häggglund's Derrida, on the other hand, argues for an arche-violence that acknowledges that any first principle is a contaminated principle of corruptibility: undecidable and incalculable. There is an ethical responsibility to the other not because she is infinitely good, but because she is finite and mortal. It is the finite that demands responsibility; were it impossible to hurt or kill the other then there would be no need for responsibility. Responsibility itself becomes infinite through the finite nature of the self and the other: finite relations between terms means that each term, as finite, is always surpassed by another finite term. Finite terms therefore extend infinitely, and create a "negative infinity of finitude",¹⁴ which, it should be noted, is the structure of fragmentation.

Derrida's other is of alterity, of a negative infinity of finitude, the spacing of *différance*, "not because it is absolutely [Good] in itself, but on the contrary, because it can never be itself".¹⁵ Thus Derrida's "absolutely other" is not a positive infinity but refers to the radical finitude of every other. An act of responsibility towards one is an act of irresponsibility towards another, the struggle for justice is a struggle for lesser violence, and each decision is haunted by the trace of what it must exclude. The other that is welcomed "can always be a plunderer or rapist, since the other who comes cannot be anticipated and can change its character at any juncture".¹⁶ For Häggglund's Derrida the relation to the other is not ethical as such, as the other is unpredictable, but is a non-ethical, non-prescriptive opening to alterity. Infinite responsibility becomes then "another name for the necessity of discrimination".¹⁷

¹⁴ Häggglund 94.

¹⁵ Häggglund 94.

¹⁶ Häggglund 124.

¹⁷ Häggglund 95.

However, it should be stressed that Häggglund misreads Levinas by arguing that the alterity of the other is reduced to the Good and the same. One is hostage to other without condition and in all circumstances; hence the emphasis in Levinas on physical suffering and sacrifice. Derek Attridge also faults Häggglund's reading of Derrida, proposing that Häggglund reduces openness to the other to a "mechanical necessity"¹⁸ that bears very little resemblance to the ironic impossibilities of hospitality, responsibility, the gift etc. etc.. There is, as Attridge argues, very little struggle in Häggglund's reading of hospitality, just calculation. Thus, while Häggglund's reading of Levinas and Derrida points to some important distinctions, there is, in a sense, not enough sense of potentiality and irony.

Irony and the "Ethical"

The connection between ethics and irony has been made before, although with rather different formulations of both the ethical and the ironic. Paul Allen Miller sees the ethical not as a set of rules or codes, but a creative act of self-formation: "the ability to reflect back upon the very fabric of our language and our selves, to make them anew".¹⁹ The ironist is ethical as she seeks "the folding back of the fabric of language and thought against itself, enabling the creation of radically new forms of meaning and self-understanding".²⁰ Reading primarily through Lacan, Miller argues that irony is "a function in language of the emergence of moments of nonmeaning".²¹ "Irony is the moment when the enunciative act causes the pre-existing code to double itself, thereby creating new possibilities for new language games, new modes of description, new forms of existence".²² The ironic presents a difference that cannot be recuperated within meaning, a way of accessing the outside, that which is other to the prescriptions and norms of the culture of the Symbolic – the Real.²³ For Miller irony is therefore ethical, as it permits us to reconceptualise ourselves: ironic doubling is "the predicate of the critical in thought and hence of any ethics of self-formation".²⁴ It is only by "not saying what you mean"²⁵ that one can have any approach to the Real, and thereby

¹⁸ Attridge 141.

¹⁹ Paul Allen Miller, "Ethics and Irony", *SubStance* 120 38.3 (2009) 51-52.

²⁰ P. Miller 51.

²¹ P. Miller 54.

²² P. Miller 69.

²³ That is, the ironic enables a step towards the Real, but is not itself the Real.

²⁴ P. Miller 55.

²⁵ P. Miller 55.

to an ethical and critical reworking of the self. Miller's subject-centred irony and ethics incorporate the perlocutionary, and anacoluthic interruptions and doublings, but also bring irony uncomfortably close to the self-involvement condemned by Hegel. His ironic ethics begins at home, with the subject, and makes no provision for the other.

In *Irony and Ethics in Narrative*, Gary Handwerk presents a mode of ethical irony which combines Schlegel's symphilosophy and Lacan's formulation of the subject. For Handwerk ethical irony "focuses on how verbal incompatibilities set up and provoke a deeper interrogation of self-consciousness. For ethical irony, an incompatibility in discourse suspends the question of identity by frustrating any immediate coherence of the subject."²⁶ Ethical irony hence

attacks the notion of the subject as equivalent to a conscious intentionality or a personal self-consciousness. To be in language is instead to be located in and by the social domain. Ethical irony relocates identity in the language through which we pose the question of identity.²⁷

Irony is a process of negation which "puts in question the very possibility of determinate meaning, for it hints at the awareness that all local meanings must finally depend on an inexpressible global signification, an elusive unity of discourse".²⁸ It is sceptical, but "adds to scepticism a doubt of one's ability to doubt, because it recognises the incurable positivity of the mind and of language".²⁹ Irony is thus

a sceptical enactment of one's own position of ignorance, which submits the adequacy of one's scepticism to another subject for further evaluation. Irony establishes an intersubjective bond based on an awareness of the *partial identity* of the subject – at once part of the dialogue and only part of itself.³⁰

Effectively Handwerk argues that language is iterable, but this iterability is precisely what makes us move towards the general or, in Schlegelian terms, the symphilosophic.

²⁶ Handwerk 2.

²⁷ Handwerk 3.

²⁸ Handwerk 172.

²⁹ Handwerk 173.

³⁰ Handwerk 173.

Handwerk's is a fragmented subject of radical contingency, whose identity is absolutely "dependent upon an alien language, speaking with the voice of the other".³¹ The subject *is* through language and through intersubjective relations, and thus engages in what Handwerk terms ironic intersubjectivity; "an interaction where the recognition of ignorance serves as a springboard to ethical involvement with another subject".³² Handwerk's formulation of ethics remains what Levinas would call ontological rather than ethical, as it is the subject rather than alterity or the other who is at the centre of the system. Gary Peters, however, steps closer to the ironic ethics of this chapter when he writes that irony is a "strategy of forging integrated structures which either *fail* to integrate or achieve a degree of integration that, as a consequence, demands precisely the infinite movement of irony to disengage the ironist from the non-ironic stasis that threatens".³³ It consists of a "perpetual flight from identity to difference and back again infinitely, its spectacular restlessness *for the sake of the other* who risks incarceration within the dubious totalities that are everywhere apparent".³⁴ Irony is of difference, a mode that attempts to avoid the imposition of a system on that which resists systemisation.

Irony is the preservation of alterity through the ahierarchical disorder of parataxis and fragmentation. In *The Ethics of Deconstruction* Simon Critchley argues that "deconstruction 'is' ethical"³⁵ because the interruption of ontological closure that it contains/produces is the "*ethical transcendence*"³⁶ of ontology. He writes that "for Derrida, the ethical moment is the interruption of the general context of conditioned hypothetical imperatives by an unconditional categorical imperative. *Ethics arises in and as the undecidable yet determinate articulation of these two orders*".³⁷ From the undecidability of these two codes comes a moment of unconditional appeal, a "yes" to alterity and the other. The ethical content of deconstruction lies in its saying "yes" to the unnameable, a "yes" found in the abyss between the conditional and the unconditional: in the openness to alterity.

³¹ Handwerk 173.

³² Handwerk 169.

³³ Gary Peters, "Dissymmetry and Height: Rhetoric, Irony and Pedagogy in the Thought of Husserl, Blanchot and Levinas", *Human Studies* 27.2 (2004) 191.

³⁴ Peters 191.

³⁵ Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) 2.

³⁶ Critchley, *Ethics* 30.

³⁷ Critchley, *Ethics* 40. That is, it interrupts the ethical relations that operate to satisfy our own desire for happiness – the convenient, prudential maxims, with categorical imperatives that strive for unconditional, universal good.

Hägglund disagrees. He argues that the “yes” of deconstruction is not an ethical affirmation but an affirmation of the trace structure of time, a “yes” to the coming of the future that is also contaminated by a negation, since the future may bring threats and difficulties. Undecidability, according to Hägglund, is not respect for the other, as alterity is itself too incalculable to be bound to a positive value: “the disjointure that opens the relation to the other is inseparable from the nonethical opening of an undecidable future”.³⁸ Deconstruction, for Hägglund, does not allow for the primary ethical relation to the good, but addresses the undecidable coming of the other. Deconstruction happens. It is neither good, nor bad, it just occurs. Thus, deconstruction is “in itself” value neutral; it enables a new understanding of the contradictions affecting ethics and politics, but provides no guide to negotiate these problems, and does not make us better at dealing with them.³⁹ Evaluation, claims Hägglund, is not necessarily good.⁴⁰

Samir Haddad, responding to Hägglund in “Language Remains”, proposes that the value of deconstructive evaluation comes from language itself, which is never value neutral: “one never evaluates in a neutral context, since the language with which one must necessarily engage is already infused with value in a sedimented history”.⁴¹ Deconstruction, he argues, is conducted in and through language, and therefore takes on its values. The terms that Derrida uses function within a textual web that contains weighting, and are therefore used with a sensibility of their connotations and associations. “Democracy”, to follow Haddad’s example, is privileged in Derrida’s writings through its descriptive merit, through the weight and generally accepted positive implications of the term rather than any – nonexistent – “essence” of democracy itself.⁴² Deconstruction is not value neutral because language is not value neutral; the social, cultural, political, and philosophical implications of each term predominantly point in a particular direction in a specific context. “This”, he writes, “does not mean that

³⁸ Hägglund 102.

³⁹ Hägglund 171. Hägglund speaks here on the specific problem of “lesser violence”.

⁴⁰ One might argue that questioning, interrogating, moving slowly but urgently through texts is a positive thing, but this itself is not necessarily “good” – think of the extensive medical experiments performed at Auschwitz, Dachau, Ravensbrück, or the Japanese unit 731. The results have been medically valuable, but were attained through absolutely tortuous practices.

⁴¹ Samir Haddad, “Language Remains”, *CR: The New Centennial Review* 9.1 (2009) 139.

⁴² See chapter six.

one is forced in one direction over another, but there will be paths of lesser and greater resistance”.⁴³

Ostensibly Haddad is reminding Hägg Lund of irony and iterability. While one reads, in deconstruction, by “inhabiting” a text, one does so within a structure that *cannot* be inhabited, that is, that cannot be filled or moulded to one’s needs without excess or remainder. The value or force of a term is an ironic force, a force of weakness that imposes itself in and through its mutability. If deconstruction has a value from language, it is an ironic and transient value, a force of weakness, a value of radical variability. Knowing that the value judgements being made are subject to mutability, that language remains (radically) iterable, that the paths of and through language are impossible and aporetic, is “better” and more (ir)responsible than blindly following outcomes or aims, than jealously adhering to strategy, than resolutely “progressing” at any cost. The value of deconstruction is the value of theory, of thought. In response then to Hägg Lund, it is in the awareness of the complexity of the happening, of the singularity of events, of that fact that the other is not necessarily good that deconstruction is, if not good, then positively (ir)responsible. One might note here too the basic (ironic) contradiction in Hägg Lund’s arguments: deconstruction is both value neutral *and* founded on violence. It is violent and yet struggle free, as Hägg Lund’s deconstruction ignores the difficulties that the irony of (ir)responsibility brings about. In response to Hägg Lund, deconstruction is not *the good*, it is not peace or rest or death or the worst, but is an aporetic, parabolic step of irony, a response of (ir)responsibility. And it is better to respond than to stay silent.

Deconstruction operates within and through language, metaphysics, other systems. It is, in a sense, a parasite. There is no outside the text, there is no outside deconstruction, it happens (to other, non-separate things). It happens to prescriptive systems, undoing and revealing, showing the excess and unsystematic by being itself excessive and unsystematic. Deconstruction does not happen alone, but happens *to* something, *with* something, *in* something – it is a priori contamination. Deconstruction does not seek to eradicate the programmatic, the systematic, the prescriptive, the denotative, the said, but to undo their solidity and supposed inevitability. Not edifices as such, not, strictly, ruins as such, but edifices in ruins. Deconstruction and metaphysics are always mutually implicated

⁴³ Haddad, “Language” 139.

in ironic, anacoluthic hyphenation. Recognising the terrain we half inhabit as fragmentary and ruinous *is* positive. “A deconstructive thinking ... has always pointed out the irreducibility of affirmation and therefore of the promise, as well as the undeconstructibility of a certain idea of justice” (SM 112). Deconstruction promises, knowing that the promise is tainted with perjury, and affirming the value of that knowledge. It is not an ethical stride, but an ironic, parabolic step of (ir)responsibility that allows for alterity and the other, knowing that who and what comes may threaten and harm. It takes the step, knowing without definite knowledge that the step towards is a step away, and that the step taken depends on an ironic, iterable mark.

The Ironic Response

In “Whom to Give to (Knowing not to Know)” Derrida addresses the story of Abraham and Isaac, a story which is “monstrous, outrageous, barely conceivable” (GD 67). The monstrosity of the story stems from the ironic double bind that pulls between responsibility to the other, and the irresponsibility of the occlusion of the *other* other that this entails. Abraham places his duty to obey God over his duty to protect his family, and thus engages in “ethics as ‘irresponsibilisation’, as an insoluble and paradoxical contradiction between responsibility *in general* and *absolute* responsibility” (GD 61). In order to be responsible and fulfil his duty to the other – God – Abraham must become a murderer, and thereby betray the other – his son. Absolute responsibility demands that one transgress ethical duty, but the moment or step of transgression does not undo ethics: “Abraham must assume absolute responsibility for sacrificing his son by sacrificing ethics, but in order for there to be a sacrifice, the ethical must retain all its value” (GD 66). Were Abraham not bound ethically – by love, responsibility and duty – to his son then in killing him he would feel no loss, and the act would not be a sacrifice.

The ethical or responsible exigency rests on the fact that “the simple concepts of alterity and of singularity” (GD 68) constitute duty and ethics as much as responsibility to the (absolute) other. As such I cannot respond to the other without ignoring the call and stepping away from an *other* other: “I am responsible to any one (that is to say to any other) only by failing in my responsibility to all the others, to the ethical or political generality. And I can never justify this sacrifice” (GD 70). There is “no front between responsibility and

irresponsibility, but only between different appropriations of the same sacrifice, different orders of responsibility” (GD 70). As soon as I enter into a relation with the other, I can respond only by sacrificing ethics, that is, by sacrificing the ethical need to respond, in the same instant, to all the others. Abraham is faithful to God only in absolute treachery of the betrayal of his son.⁴⁴

When Isaac asks Abraham where they will find the sacrificial lamb Abraham replies “God will provide”. As Derrida writes, “By speaking without lying, he responds without responding. This is a strange responsibility that consists neither of responding nor of not responding” (GD 74). Derrida compares it to the (non)response of Melville’s Bartleby – “I would prefer not to” – which

takes on the responsibility of a response without a response. It evokes the future without either predicting or promising; it utters nothing fixed, determinable, positive, or negative. The modality of this repeated utterance that says nothing, promises nothing, neither refuses nor accepts anything, the tense of this singularly insignificant statement reminds one of a nonlanguage or a secret language. (GD 75)

Bartleby’s response suspends dialogue. Not quite a “no” and far from a “yes”, its incompleteness prevents the interlocutor from following the conversational thread – it is a response without responding that prevents (further) response. It is a permanent parabasis, a step/not that interrupts without interrupting, that answers without answering. Bartleby does not reveal what he wants, simply that he would prefer not to. Abraham does not reveal what he wants, simply that God will provide. Bartleby airs his preference without action, Abraham acts without airing his preference. In the strangeness of their replies they do not lie but speak in secret, operating in a strange space between truth and falsity, affirmative and negative.

Bartleby’s response can be likened to writing as Socrates condemns it in the *Phaedrus*. It repeats itself incessantly, responding in the same way to every question. Its presence is an absence, it has no real identity. It is absolute passivity; it is not given in response or specific engagement but simply reiterates a negative preference. As Blanchot writes, Bartleby’s refrain expresses an abdication that precedes all decisions, “abnegation understood as the abandonment of the self, a

⁴⁴ As Attridge points out, most practical ethical systems thus “try to find a way to rank responsibilities; Derrida’s point is that such systems are necessarily incoherent, for they use a systematic philosophical language in an attempt to capture and legislate for what is constitutively resistant to such language” (68).

relinquishment of identity, refusal which does not cleave to refusal but opens to failure, to the loss of being, to thought” (ED 17). Its passivity does not house identity; its abstention steps away from presence, identity and the self-present moment. The passivity of Bartleby’s phrase, a passivity “which would interrupt our reason, our speech, our experience” (ED 16), also interrupts time; each use reverberates with every other use, placing the moment – at this very moment – aphoristically out of joint. Bartleby is a copyist, and his words copy time, placing each fragmentary recurrence out of step with itself, and causing time and dialogue to falter. The ironic parabasis of his phrase is a passive rupture, a step that is not. It is a constative description that presents nothing, a performative that produces nothing. It simply reverberates.

Bartleby’s responses are a

sublime irony. Speaking in order not to say anything or to say something other than what one thinks, speaking in such a way as to intrigue, disconcert, question, or have someone or something else speak (the law, the lawyer), means speaking ironically. Irony, in particular Socratic irony, consists of not saying anything, declaring that one doesn’t have any knowledge of something, but doing that in order to interrogate, to have someone or something (the lawyer, the law) speak or think. *Eirōneia* dissimulates, it is the act of questioning by feigning ignorance, by pretending. (GD 76)

Irony here is speaking otherwise, speaking anacoluthically, speaking so as to interrupt speech *and* speaking so as to let the other speak.⁴⁵ It is a conversation held differently, a conversation of interruption, a response of parataxis in that it follows but does not specifically engage, and does not demand a particular response. It is next in line but without logical conjunction, a paratactic fragment that resists assimilation into an ordered syntax. “It isn’t”, Derrida writes, “unlike the incongruous yet familiar humour, the *unheimlich* or uncanniness of the story” (GD 76). As a phrase it is grammatically unremarkable and semantically prosaic, and yet it anacoluthically and ironically interrupts itself, making itself strange and disconcerting. It is apathetic and yet oddly decisive, active and passive, simply descriptive and yet powerfully performative in the stasis it produces. “I would

⁴⁵ Bartleby’s response is ironic, in that it speaks “in order not to say anything”. It is not an example of Derrida’s reading of Socratic irony, as it does not give room to the other, but silences her.

prefer not to” produces interruption, produces a conversational or dialogic abyss. It confesses and excuses and promotes hiatus, a permanent parabasis.⁴⁶

Kierkegaard, Derrida writes, sees irony in Abraham’s response too, as “it is always irony when I say something and still do not say anything” (GD 77): when speech is silent. And yet this irony is not rhetorical: “Abraham doesn’t speak in figures, fables, parables, metaphors, ellipses, or enigmas. His irony is meta-rhetorical” (GD 77). He doesn’t make recourse to enigmatic language, because he doesn’t know what God is going to do. “He decides, but his absolute decision is neither guided nor controlled by knowledge” (GD 77). But a decision is, in the end, always secret, responsible and irresponsible: “Abraham’s decision is absolutely responsible because it answers for itself before the absolute other. Paradoxically it is also irresponsible because it is guided neither by reason nor by an ethics justifiable before men or before the law of some universal tribunal” (GD 77).⁴⁷ The irony of saying without saying (anything) is not always or necessarily intentional or based on knowledge, but an irony of the parabolic, paratactic structure of language. Irony speaks and does not speak; it speaks in (ir)responsibility. Abraham’s and Bartleby’s (non)responses, though perhaps *intended* in vastly different ways, stem from the same ironic structure of the mark. *Abraham’s attempted responsibility is hyphenated to Bartleby’s irresponsibility.*

The (secret) response of irony indicates a further parabolic interruption within ethics and responsibility. Abraham lies and doesn’t lie when he responds to his son’s question about the sacrificial lamb. He says that God will provide, which is true, while revealing nothing and keeping his secret.⁴⁸ In this way Abraham transgresses the ethical order, at least according to Kierkegaard, who sees the highest expression of the ethical as what binds us to our own – the family or the

⁴⁶ The strangeness of “I would prefer not to” can be likened to the odd contamination that occurs in the phrase “Just imagine, I was not thinking about it” addressed in chapter two. This quotation contains an imperative while referring to something already defined and in the past tense. “I was not thinking about it” does not simply mean that I forgot. Beyond the amnesia, there is a confession that acknowledges a dereliction of duty, and which “pleads guilty and not guilty at the same time” (WA 163). It moves between past and present/future, imperative and descriptive, confession and avowal, constative and performative, guilt and innocence.

⁴⁷ “A decision”, Derrida writes, “always takes place beyond calculation” (GD 95). For a decision to be worthy of the name there must be an element of breaking free, of the perhaps and the incalculable. A decision must not be simply the automatic and inevitable expression of the subject. We begin by responding, not deciding. This, however, does not work to absolve the subject from the nature of her response to the other, nor to justify her response. The subject’s failure to step up to every other is unjustifiable.

⁴⁸ Abraham is correct, but only, in a sense, accidentally, as the sacrificial lamb that God provides is not Isaac, as Abraham thinks, but a ram caught in a nearby thicket.

community of friends/nation. Abraham's spoken silence betrays ethics. Each subject is singularly responsible, but the first effect of language is to deprive the subject of her singularity. This causes her to renounce her liberty and her responsibility, since once she speaks she is never and no longer herself: "as soon as one speaks, as soon as one enters the medium of language, one loses that very singularity. One therefore loses the possibility of deciding or the right to decide" (GD 80). It is usually thought that responsibility is tied to the public and the nonsecret, to accounting for what you say and do. But Derrida states that "the absolute responsibility of my actions, to the extent that such a responsibility remains mine, singularly so, something no one else can perform in my place, instead implies secrecy" (GD 60). We strive for a mode of responsibility whose ironic interruption takes the least irresponsible step.

Ironic Hospitality

Ironic (ir)responsibility is exemplified by the double bind of hospitality. As Derrida writes in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, "hospitality is not simply some region of ethics ... it is ethicity itself, the whole and the principle of ethics" (AE 50).⁴⁹ Hospitality is anacoluthic interruption, both of the self – "One will understand nothing about hospitality if one does not understand what 'interrupting oneself' might mean, the interruption of the self by the self as other" (AE 52) – and of itself, as it is split between the absolute and the conditional. Unconditional hospitality is the welcome without reservation, limitation or calculation given to "the absolute, unknown, anonymous other[s] ... without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names" (OH 25). Absolute hospitality welcomes the other, even though the other may bring damage, harm or hurt: a risk that is "necessary so that good hospitality can have a chance, the chance of letting the other come" (AE 35). Conditional hospitality, on the other hand, is the mode whereby individuals, societies and states attempt to protect their property by determining and defining the other and the form of hospitality she will receive. Thus conditions are imposed that transform gifts into contracts and betray the principle of unconditional welcome.

⁴⁹ In *Rogues* the emphasis is somewhat different: "I have always ... held *unconditional hospitality*, as *impossible*, to be *heterogeneous* to the *political*, the *juridical*, and even the *ethical*" (R 172).

However, even within absolute hospitality lies an impossible tension. The other, the foreigner, must be welcomed unconditionally and without questions, but must also be welcomed individually and in her own name. Hospitality therefore consists of doing everything possible to welcome the other singularly, in her own name, without making the question “what is your name?” a point of control. Welcoming the foreigner, giving her rights and recognising her name and place within a legal system, is a condition of possibility for hospitality, but also that which makes it impossible, as it changes the other from the foreign to the familiar. Thus hospitality always takes a parabolic step, a step forward that is a step back, a step that is not. Conditional and unconditional hospitality exist in aphoristic relation; contradictory yet inseparable they are moments of simultaneity without simultaneity, “instant[s] of impossible synchrony” (OH 81). Each step of hospitality is a step out of time, a moment out of joint split by the ironic antinomy of (in)hospitality.

Hospitality to the other, as the welcome of the other, is also always subject to the interruptive, anacoluthic doubling that occurs within the genitive “of”, so that the *welcome of the other* is always a welcome received from the other *and* a welcome given to the other. The welcoming host (*hôte*) who considers herself the owner of the establishment, and who receives the guest (*hôte*), is in truth an ironic *hôte* (host/guest) received in her own home. She receives the hospitality that she offers, and receives it from her own home, which does not, in the end, belong to her. “The one who welcomes is first of all welcomed in his own home. The one who invites is invited by the one whom he invites” (AE 42). The welcome given to the other is a response to a pre-ordinary, anarchic pre-welcome received from the other. It is the possibility of responding to the other in welcome that enables the self to be at home, though at home in the home of the other. The home is loaned to the self so the other can be welcomed. The guest/host is also *hostage*, a subject/object valuable only in the way in which she can be substituted for the other. Thus not only are the subject’s acts of hospitality tainted by inhospitality, but the *subject as host* is ironically interrupted by *subject as hostage*. Homeless in her own house, the subject receives an anarchic welcome at the very moment that she gives it.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ For Derrida and Levinas the pervertibility of hospitality is linked to gender difference. The pre-ordinary welcome is feminine:

The ironic interruptions and excesses that transfigure ethics, rendering it *(ir)responsibility* and *(in)hospitality*, are performed in Derrida's phrase "*tout autre est tout autre*". This expression translates tautologously as *every other is every other*, or non-tautologously as *every other is every bit other*. It thus ironically interrupts itself, its ambiguous grammatical structure functioning like parataxis – its grammar pivots, allowing *tout* to function both as adjective and adverb, and *autre* as noun and adjective. "If the first *tout* is an indefinite pronominal adjective, then the first *autre* becomes a noun and the second in all probability, an adjective or attribute. One no longer has a case of tautology but instead a radical heterology" (GD 83). The anacoluthic excess of its paratactic *blancs* enables what appears tautologous to step up to alterity, and back again. There appear, in ironic movement, as if "on the same musical scale, two alarmingly different themes [*partitions*, (musical) scores] that, through their disturbing likeness, emerge as incompatible" (GD 83). The sentence fragments itself, creating a paratactic series with itself. It includes the singular other and the *other* other(s), ethics and politics. Its step towards a suppression of difference – every other is every other, all otherness is the same – is interrupted by its own anacoluthic heterogeneity – every other is every bit other, each other is different. It denies any form of hierarchy within relations – each other is equally other. It emphasises that every other is an other of absolute alterity and difference. As we should not speak of fragment but fragments of irreducible singularity, we should not speak of an other but a series of singular others to whom each subject is singularly – and impossibly – bound. The anacoluthon of the other interrupts the sentence, performing the interruption of the self, responsibility and hospitality that takes place. Thus, in a single phrase, a fragment of ironic responsibility.

The absolute, absolutely originary welcome, indeed, the pre-original welcome, the welcoming par excellence, is feminine; it takes place in a place that cannot be appropriated, in an open 'interiority' whose hospitality the master or the owner receives before himself then wishing to give it. (AE 45)

The master of the house exists in his ambiguous position of host and hostage, because the other, as woman, is already there, as the womb, *khōra*, always pre-exists. In *The Gift of Death* Derrida writes that "Perhaps irony would permit us to find something like a common thread in the questions I have just posed [regarding sacrificial responsibility and the woman] and what Hegel said about woman: "that she is the eternal irony of the community"" (GD 77). I am very reluctant to equate irony and the feminine or femininity. For an interesting work on the topic, see Lydia Rainford's *She Changes by Intrigue: Irony, Femininity and Feminism* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005).

Levinas and the Responsible Response

For Levinas ethics is of response and interruption, an ironic, parabolic engagement in which the self interrupts itself so as to give the other room to speak. It is a skewed, asymmetrical and unequal dialogue wherein answer precedes question as the subject responds prior to the request. A responsible dialogue is an aphoristic, contrapuntal one, always out of time, as responsibility began in a diachronic time beyond memory or recuperation. The response comes before the question, but the question comes/came in an inaudible, diachronic past. The first word is never the first word, and there is no last word. It is a responsibility which never ends, and is never enough, and as such is what Blanchot calls a *disastrous responsibility* – “the responsibility that never lightens the Other’s burden (never lightens the burden he is for me), and makes us mute as far as the word we owe him is concerned” (ED 27). Levinasian responsibility, writes Blanchot, requires

that I answer for the impossibility of being responsible – that to which it has always already consigned me by holding me accountable and also discounting me altogether. And this paradox leaves nothing intact – not subjectivity any more than the subject, not the individual any more than the person. (ED 25)

There is no longer a difference between a responsibility for and a responsibility to – the subject is generally and unlimitedly obliged, in an anarchic responsibility which began in a *prepast*; an irrecoverable, immemorable past.⁵¹

Responsibility is the “endless critique” (OB 44) of permanent, ironic parabasis, the interruption of the self for the other. As Simon Critchley summarises, ethics “is the critical *mise en question* of the liberty, spontaneity, and cognitive emprise of the ego that seeks to reduce all otherness to itself”.⁵² The post-Cartesian subject, the *ego cogito*, is a subject engaged in self-reflection,

⁵¹ Bernhard Waldenfels, “Response and Responsibility in Levinas”, *Ethics as First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature and Religion*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak (New York: Routledge, 1995) 43. Waldenfels argues that the responsibility in question is not a response – it is predetermined and therefore no decision, as a response without possible alternatives is not really a response at all. In response to this Hugh Miller notes that the “question” asked by the other/neighbour precedes consciousness, and therefore decisions. It is a “prick of conscience” that places the other in obsessive proximity such that consciousness can no more deny it than breathe. This does not annihilate the self, but enable the self to be the-one-for-the-other (Hugh Miller, “Reply to Bernhard Waldenfels”, *Ethics as First Philosophy* 55). Levinas’s concept of responsibility is involuntary, and therefore does not partake of the difficulties of the decision outlined above in relation to Derrida. This is an important difference between Levinas and Derrida.

⁵² Simon Critchley, *Ethics* 5.

being in the act of analysing being. Levinas seeks to make ethics *first philosophy*, replacing an ontology of the subject, with its attendant preoccupations with truth, apophansis, essence and consciousness, with a being-for-the-other outside of thematisation and comprehensibility. The subject is then a subjectile, “a passivity, wholly a supporting” (OB 180), “a *sub-jectum* ... under the weight of the universe, responsible for everything” (OB 116). The subject’s responsibility is a pre-originary obligation, an order obeyed before it is given, and as such the subject cannot choose, subsequently using that choice to consolidate an identity. The subject is therefore sacrificed rather than self-sacrificing, as “it is only in this way that the *for-the-other*, the passivity more passive still than any passivity, the emphasis of sense, is kept from being *for-oneself*” (OB 50). And yet only the subject can substitute herself, she is “unique in the unexceptional requisition of responsibility” (OB 53), and a suffering that might always be a suffering for nothing. The subject must incessantly alienate herself, be dis-interested in herself, perform a *kenosis*. She is a stranger in her own home, hostage to the other; the welcome she offers is not hers to give and is given/taken even before a request is made. She steps in dissymmetrical step towards the other: “I have always taken one step more toward him – which is possible only if this step is responsibility” (OB 84).

Levinas’s ethical subject does not self-reflect, but reflects on the other – the face in the mirror is never hers:

the recurrence to oneself cannot stop at oneself, but goes to the hither side of oneself; *in* the recurrence to oneself there is a going to the hither side of oneself. A does not, as in identity, return to A, but retreats to the hither side of its point of departure. (OB 114)

Even reflexive forms of verbs are not centred on the subject but signify “a modality of passivity which in substitution is beyond even passivity” (OB 138). The very grammar of the subject is altered, so that “The word *I* means *here I am*, answering for everything and for everyone” (OB 114). As Derrida writes,

“Here I am”: the first and only possible response to the call by the other, the originary moment of responsibility such as it exposes me to the singular other, the one who appeals to me. “Here I am” is the only self-presentation presumed by every form of responsibility: I am ready to respond, I reply that I am ready to respond. (GD 71)

“I” is not longer the mark of a self-present identity, but an empty pronoun said by she who, in responsibility, is simply “the-one-for-the-other”. The ethical subject is “only this unlimited passivity of an accusative which does not issue out of a declension it would have undergone starting with the nominative” (OB 112). She is always accused, and cannot decline; she can never be grammatically repositioned and hence loses the power to ever refuse.

The absolute obligation of the ethical face-to-face relation between “the-one-for-the-other” and the other is complicated by what Levinas terms the third, or the neighbour: “The third party is other than the neighbour, but also another neighbour, and also a neighbour of the other, and not simply his fellow” (OB 157). It “introduces a contradiction in the saying whose signification before the other until then went in one direction” (OB 157). The contradiction leads to justice,⁵³ the exigencies of responsibility and the constant negotiating between the conditional and the unconditional, the possible and the impossible, the thematisable and nonthematisable. The responsible interruption between the face-to-face and the third is mirrored in the ironic anacoluthons of the *saying* and the *said*, and the *synchronic* and the *diachronic*. Synchrony and the said are the time and language to which we have direct access. The anacoluthon that occurs in both instances is a radical ironic interruption that steps beyond a (simple) doubling of codes – the synchronic and the said are disrupted by that which is radically other to their content/form/structure/theme/time/code but which can only be accessed through their content/form/structure/theme/time/code. They are hence interrupted by an ironic anacoluthon of alterity and absence – interrupted by that which figures as a trace within their codes, by that which is *not quite* in the same time or space but in and out of time, in and out of step: beyond and within. Contamination is here contiguity, a contiguity that doubles space and time without rendering it quite the *same* space or time. The ironic anacoluthon parabolically steps out of itself.

The said is a language which comprises themes, concepts and propositional statements, and which irresponsibly binds the other to the cognitive and the systematic. In the said language functions to underwrite ontology and the

⁵³ Not Derrida’s undeconstructible justice, but justice as inseparable from politics and political practice. As Attridge puts it, Levinas “wishes to avoid compromising the primacy of the ethical relation with the singular other, but at the same time to avoid relegating the third and justice to a merely secondary and subsidiary role” (107).

centrality of the subject: “The said is not simply a sign or an expression of a meaning; it proclaims and establishes this as that” (OB 35). It is grounded in “the very impossibility of anything else, of any revolution that would not be a revolving upon oneself” (OB 182), and presents everything before us, “be it at the price of a betrayal” (OB 6). Against this is *the saying*, a responsible, ethical language that does not systemise or thematise, that does not centre itself on comprehensible communication and definable knowledge, which is not spoken by a strong “I” and does not presuppose a “sovereign and active subjectivity, [an] undeclined self-consciousness” (OB 47). Saying “signifies otherwise than as an apparitor presenting essence and entities” (OB 46); it is an ethical “language”⁵⁴ that cannot be reduced to a language centred on impersonal, general *Being* as it is (of the) *otherwise than Being*, other to ontology and a subject-centred discourse. The saying says the responsibility,⁵⁵ passivity, proximity and obsession of the subject who breathes for the other; it speaks of perlocution, of effects rather than statements, of an asymmetrical discourse of nonreciprocal responsibility, of “the most passive passivity” (OB 50).

The saying is the *condition* for all communication, the exposure to the other that allows communication to be. Communication in this sense is therefore not the mirroring of mark and concept in an auto-affection of certainty; it is not “a modality of cognition” (OB 48) but a giving of the self to the other in an asymmetrical discourse that is not grounded in the exchange of concepts.⁵⁶ Responsible communication is a strange dialogue, a response given before the question – always responsibility over questionability – a performative “here I am” that exceeds any constative context. However, the saying cannot be *said* without the said; it cannot be expressed without the reduction and betrayal of the constative or propositional form. This betrayal is not an absolute defeat, as “the saying that is absorbed in the said is not exhausted in this manifestation” (OB 46). But in order to approach the other what is required is a said that is not said but which is *unsaid*, that *unthematizes* itself, a language of the same that steps to the language of the other: “The *otherwise than being* is stated in a saying that must

⁵⁴ The saying is not a language as we know language – it is the exposure to the other that we attempt to express in language (the said).

⁵⁵ “The responsibility for another is precisely a saying prior to the said” (OB 43).

⁵⁶ As Levinas writes, “The problem of communicating reduced to the problem of the truth of this communication for him that receives it amounts to the problem of certainty, of the coinciding of self with self, as though coinciding were the ultimate secret of communication, as though truth were only disclosure” (OB 119).

also be unsaid in order to thus extract the *otherwise than being* from the said in which it already comes to signify but a *being otherwise*” (OB 7).⁵⁷ The said must be *reduced* to the saying.⁵⁸ The saying and the said exist in ironic hyphenation – wholly separate the said nonetheless always contains a trace of the saying, and the saying can only be accessed through the said. As Edith Wyschogrod writes, it is not that language can be used to express the excess beyond expression, but that “thought that betrays as it exposes this excess can be regarded as envisaging a certain difference, as a thinking of the ligature between philosophy and that which transcends it, that separates as it unites them”.⁵⁹ Communication is always an *ironic hyphenation* of two codes, or, perhaps better, the anacoluthon between the codified and the noncodified, between the system and the excess of the system. Responsible communication sides with the nonthematized, which can only be approached through the ironic interruption of the thematized.

In formulating a mode of linguistic response to the other, Levinas divides time into the synchronic – that which formulates identity – and the diachronic – that which is wholly other to identity, consciousness and the recuperable or assimilable. For Levinas the essence of an entity is its process or event of being, its placement in time as a verb, and so temporalisation is that which allows for identity to be. Consciousness is therefore temporalisation. Consciousness/temporalisation is the differing of the self from itself – the “differing of the identical” (OB 9) – that allows it to reflect, and as such is the temporal distance of the self from itself. Over the course of this infinite differing the past is modified without changing as it sinks deeper into the past, and “memory recuperates in images what retention was not able to preserve, and

⁵⁷ This is not to imply that Levinas in any way thought to eradicate propositional language. He writes:

Our task is to show that the plot proper to saying does indeed lead it to the said, to the putting together of structures which make possible justice and the ‘I think’. The said, the appearing, arises in the saying. Essence then has its hour and its time. Clarity occurs, and thought aims at themes. But all that is in function of a prior signification proper to saying, which is neither ontological or ontic. Our task is to establish its articulation and signifyingness antecedent to ontology. In correlation with the said (in which the saying runs the risk of being absorbed as soon as the said is formulated), the saying itself is indeed thematized, exposes in essence even what is on the hither side of ontology, and flows into the temporalisation of essence (OB 46).

⁵⁸ The reduction that takes place here is not a traditional phenomenological reduction as it does not step back to the sovereign self, but to something prior to the ego.

⁵⁹ Edith Wyschogrod, “Language and Alterity in the Thought of Levinas”, *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 189.

historiography reconstructs that whose image is lost. To speak of consciousness is to speak of time” (OB 32). That is, to speak of *synchronic* time.

Diachronic time is a time that is otherwise. It is a lost time that cannot be re-presented – or represented – and that is therefore non-ontological as it cannot be used to consolidate a knowledge of the ego. This time is “the disjunction of identity where the same does not rejoin the same: there is non-synthesis, lassitude. The for-oneself of identity is now no longer for itself” (OB 52). It is the time of the beyond being, that does not allow the reduction “of men to self-consciousness and self-consciousness to the concept, that is, to history, to deduce from the concept and from history the subjectivity and the ‘I’” (OB 18). As a result of diachrony the identity of the subject comes to it from outside itself as it substitutes itself for the other; it can no longer be for-itself but must be for-another. The saying is thus of diachronic time: “saying, in the form of responsibility for another, is bound to an irrecoverable, unrepresentable, past, temporalising according to a time with separate epochs, a diachrony” (OB 47).

The diachronic speaks of “a past more ancient than every representable origin, a pre-original and anarchical *passed*” (OB 9); a past which never occurred in a present. This anarchic past is a time in which the unlimited responsibility to the other began: “The unlimited responsibility in which I find myself comes from the hither side of my freedom, from a ‘prior to every memory,’ an ‘ulterior to every accomplishment,’ from the non-present par excellence, the non-original, the an-archic, prior to and beyond essence” (OB 10). Were my responsibility to figure in a present it would figure in a time that had a beginning and an end: a responsibility in a finite time is a limited responsibility. Since responsibility begins in a diachronic time, it did not begin and therefore cannot end. It is anarchic; it begins have already begun. And therefore occurs in a lost time “that flows between the fingers of Mnemosyne” (OB 84). Diachrony, a radicalisation of ironic, aphoristic time, is the time of *Lēthē*.⁶⁰

Diachronic time can be likened therefore to the time of the permanent parabasis as it ironically interrupts and oversteps relations, both the self-relation of the subject and the relation between the subject and the other. The reaction of the “I” to the face is one of a lapse in time, a relation that takes place in a present that is already a past and which cannot be re-presented. The “I” is always late,

⁶⁰ See chapter two.

always out of time, relating to the other in an impossible, diachronic, aphoristic time – the self and other, and the self and the self are in ironic counterpoint, never synchronised, never contemporaneous, never present. It is not that diachronic time is ironic time, but that ironic, aphoristic temporal relations stem from the parabolic, anacoluthic interruption of the synchrony of the said by the diachrony of the saying. These ironic interruptions form the theoretical basis of Levinas's ethics – the next section addresses how these anacoluthons are employed in ethical writing.

Ironic, Ethical Writing(s)

How can one write ethically? How can one write so as to betray the other the least?

Blanchot writes that

the word “responsibility” – contrasting as it does with our reason without thereby consigning us to some facile irrationality – comes as though from an unknown language which we only speak counter to our heart and to life, and unjustifiably. ... One would thus have to turn toward some language that never has been written – a language never inscribed but that is always to be prescribed – in order that this incomprehensible word be understood in its disastrous heaviness and in its way of summoning us to turn toward the disaster without either understanding it or bearing it. (ED 26-27)

How does one approach the other and write in a language that has never been written? How can one avoid systemisation and homogeneity? As Robert Bernasconi writes, a major objection to Levinas's work prior to *Otherwise than Being* was that “in the course of articulating his claim that ethics is beyond being and so unthematisable, he makes a theme of the unthematisable”.⁶¹ Jill Robbins agrees, arguing that

all of Levinas's ethical discourse can be seen to run precisely this risk of falling into a discourse *on* the ethical. A speaking to the other becomes a speaking about the other. How to speak about this ethical language without rendering its performative dimension constative, without returning it to the denotative language of the same?⁶²

⁶¹ Robert Bernasconi, “Skepticism in the Face of Philosophy”, *Re-Reading Levinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991) 149.

⁶² Robbins 13.

An aesthetic, rhetorical, ludic language may seem to be the answer. Yet Levinas is notorious for his distrust of poetry and art: “Reality and its Shadow” decried art as unethical to such an extent that on its first publication in 1948 in *Les Temps Modernes* the editors also published a commentary voicing severe disagreement. As Leslie Hill writes, “it is well known that from the outset Levinas was deeply suspicious of poetry, all too often associated by him with mystification, pagan magic, and sorcery”.⁶³ Levinas may not, as Robbins writes, “seem a philosopher who would be wedded to the propositional style: he has too many quirks, both conceptual and stylistic. But there is no question that he is a philosopher who is at pains to exclude the aesthetic”.⁶⁴

An ethical writing must not annihilate the subject in overwhelming, poetic rhythm, since the subject must be singularly able to substitute itself for the other. A responsible writing must step up to the other in straightforward sincerity, but not restrict the otherness or alterity of the other by wholly betraying it in the constraining propositions of the said. However, a straightforward *ethical step* by no means corresponds to a straightforward *said* – sincere language is not “easy” language. An ethical language is one that interrupts the subject and the said to step straight up to the other and the saying, but the straight step to the saying is not the same as the straightforward in the said.

Robbins notes how, in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas is opposed to the tropological: “In privileging such an ethical language, Levinas quite explicitly ... excludes rhetoric – as a form of language which is devious, that is not straight, that does not face – and with it, implicitly, any language that is figured or troped”.⁶⁵ However, despite this, as Derrida establishes,

Levinas’s writing ... in which stylistic gestures (especially in *Totality and Infinity*) can less than ever be distinguished from intention, forbids the prosaic disembodiment into conceptual frameworks that is the first violence of all commentary. Certainly, Levinas recommends the good usage of prose which breaks Dionysic charm or violence, and forbids poetic rapture, but to no avail: in *Totality and Infinity* the use of metaphor, remaining admirable and most often – if not always – beyond rhetorical abuse, shelters within its pathos the most decisive movements of the discourse. (WD 397-98)

⁶³ Leslie Hill, “‘Distrust of Poetry’: Levinas, Blanchot, Celan”, *MLN* 120 (2005) 988.

⁶⁴ Robbins 53.

⁶⁵ Robbins 76.

In *Otherwise than Being* the for-the-other is described as a trope containing the non-assemblable elements of diachrony (OB 69), and “The tropes of an ethical language are found to be adequate for certain structures of the description: for the sense of the approach in its contrast with knowing, the face in its contrast with a phenomenon” (OB 120). The face-to-face relation is not a metaphor, but the tropological steps so as not to fall into the presumption of knowledge and control. Ethical language is a force, an approach, an apology and pledge, a promise and a perjury. It can never (just) describe the ethical, but must *perform* it. It steps in a style/force of interruption and proximity, counterpoint and anacoluthon, a said ironically interrupted by the saying, a synchrony ironically interrupted by diachrony. Robbins writes: “Self-interruption is the trope for a form of ethical discourse in which the interruption is not reabsorbed into thematisation and totality, namely, an ethical discourse that *performs* its own putting into question”.⁶⁶

Robbins briefly describes an ethical language in terms of parataxis, although she doesn’t use the term: “Composed entirely of vocatives and datives, such a language cannot have a syntax. It stammers ‘you, you, you’”.⁶⁷ Ethical language is *ironic* – parabasis and parataxis – a writing that singularly presents the self only to erase the self before the other, a writing without order and syntax which presents the self to the other in noncognitive disarray: a gasped parataxis, a breathing for the other. It interrupts and fragments itself, presenting a text that elides the cognitive and the propositional. As Lyotard writes, “Instead of being the *description* of an experience, conducted by an I in quest of self-knowledge, perhaps Levinas’s writing is the *testimony of the fracture*” [emphasis added].⁶⁸ Rather than presuming that this means using language against itself, or forcing it to step outside of its possibilities, in “At This Very Moment In This Work Here I Am” Derrida asks “if it is not this language, this tongue, that is *untied by and from itself*, therefore opened to the wholly other, to its own beyond, in such a way that it is less a matter of exceeding this language than of dealing otherwise with its own possibilities” (AM 150). We must move *beyond* language *within* language, as the “passage beyond language requires language or rather the text as a place for the trace of a step that is not (present) elsewhere” (AM 154). A responsible

⁶⁶ Robbins 145.

⁶⁷ Robbins xxiii.

⁶⁸ Lyotard, *The Differend* 113.

discourse that steps up to the saying gives space for a parabolic step, a step that never occurred in any present or presentable time, but that nonetheless leaves footprints along the way.

In response to Derrida's question – "How, then, does he [Levinas] write?" (AM 150) – we must answer: "With irony". Parabolic irony, the step that is not, steps up to the unrepresentable, and is a mode of writing that, to borrow Derrida's term, is *faulty*, so that "the fault, the one that consists in inscribing the wholly other in the empire of the same, alters the same enough to absolve it from and of itself" (AM 150). The fault is the fault of irony, of anacoluthic interruption, paratactic hyphenation, and parabolic transgression. Thus Levinas's ethical response, which "responds to the Other – for the Other – and approaches writing by ordering itself according to this for-the-Other" (AM 150), responds through irony. Levinas writes:

Language would exceed the limits of what is thought, by suggesting, letting be understood without ever making understandable, an implication of a meaning distinct from that which comes to sign from the simultaneity of systems or the logical definitions of concepts. This *possibility is laid bare in the poetic said*, and the interpretation it calls for ad infinitum [emphasis added]. (OB 169-70)⁶⁹

The poetic said lays bare the possibility of a language which exceeds the limits of what is thought, that enables the receiver to *do before understanding* as a meaning is transferred that is other to a propositional meaning. It is a language, and remains in the provenance of the said, but is, so to speak, the *least bad* said. As Levinas explains, the "unnarratable other loses his face as a neighbor in narration. The relationship with him is indescribable in the literal sense of the term, unconvertible into a history, irreducible to the simultaneousness of writing, the eternal present of a writing that records or presents results" (OB 166). The poetic, ironic said does not narrate or describe the other as it does not tell a tale but performs an approach to the other: "As a sign given of this signification of signs, proximity also delineates the trope of lyricism: to love by telling one's love to the beloved – long songs, the possibility of poetry, of art" (OB 199). It is a poetry

⁶⁹ While the possibility is laid bare in the poetic said, it should not be presumed that Levinas thought that poetry was ethical. Poetry and art are too self-involved to be wholly ethical. "Art is the pre-eminent exhibition in which the said is reduced to a pure theme, to absolute exposition, even to shamelessness capable of holding all looks for which it is exclusively destined. The said is reduced to the Beautiful, which supports Western ontology" (OB 40).

taking dictation from the other, tracing the words of the other across the heart, turning but never leading back to home. It is a passive perlocutionary act signifying towards the other. Levinas uses language ironically, playing with lacunae, interruption, quotation, repetition, disjunction and non-contemporaneity, producing, as he describes it, a very “strange discussion” (OB 183) indeed.⁷⁰

Levinas’s texts abound with phrases and typographies that perform ironic hyphenation and interruption. Certain terms are schismed with hyphens, split between prefix and stem so that the step between their independent and composite meanings is emphasised – *an-archic*, *dia-chrony*, *extra-ordinary*, *dis-interested*, *de-posing*, *ex-ception*. In other phrases expected lacunae are elided, or replaced with hyphens – *one-in-the-place-of-the-other*, *one-for-the-other* – conjoining words so that new composites are created. Phrases are (seemingly) tautologous: “passivity more passive than all passivity” (OB 14), “The subjectivity of subjection of the self is the suffering of suffering, the ultimate offering oneself, or suffering in the offering of oneself” (OB 54), “saying, saying, saying itself” (OB 143), and (apparently) contradictory – “unsayable saying” (OB 44). The repetition of terms within sentences – and over the course of Levinas’s text(s) – causes phrases to spiral in on themselves *and* wheel outward, their tautology interrupted or undone when the phrases are broken down. Their recurrence is always an interruption, both by future and past contexts, and by the terms that succeed them, so that *obsession*, *substitution*, *proximity*, *exposure*, *sensibility* all operate in ways similar to Derrida’s nonsynonymous substitutions. Each one is interrupted before it can solidify into a defining theme. Robbins notes that Levinas’s phrases are subject to the inversion of *hysteron proteron*, a term used by Schlegel to describe irony. Hence phrases like “the hand was thrown in before the game began”,⁷¹ whose temporal exigency or inversion can be likened to the ironic interruption that occurs in the phrase “do before understanding”, an ironic obligation that figures throughout Levinas’s work.⁷²

⁷⁰ Interestingly, Levinas describes Derrida’s work as strange too: “A new style of thinking is dawning on us in reading these exceptionally precise texts which are yet so strange” (WO 3).

⁷¹ Robbins 26-27.

⁷² The act of doing before understanding is one that, as “*Che cos’è*” would argue, has to be learned by heart. As Lyotard outlines, for Levinas the order as ethical command is more important than the content of the order or any commentary on the order. A prescriptive statement can easily slip into a denotative one by being questioned – it thus describes or mentions rather than obliges – or by being disobeyed – it becomes an object of commentary. In order for a prescriptive statement to remain as such it must be instantly obeyed before understanding, as making something an object of knowledge reduces it to the order of constative description. “Close the door” thus becomes a

Otherwise than Being is a permanent parabasis of interruption and conjunction that operates as infinite fragmentability; the text is fragmented into three sections – “the argument”, “the exposition” and “in other words”. These fragments are fragmented into six chapters, which are divided into numbered fragments, many of which are divided into alphabetised fragments. While these sections and subsections give the appearance of a rigorously thematised order, they are interrupted by constant repetition. Each fragment exists independently of each other fragment, and forms part of a text that is a very faulty, fragmentary whole. The repetition is and is not repetition; figuring in a different fragment – and the fragments themselves comprise fragments of sentences and phrases – repeated expositions of, for example, proximity, cognition, sensibility, the saying and the said, are not simple repetitions by dint of their different position and frame. Thus Levinas’s text performs “the infinite insistence of waves on a beach: return and repetition, always, of the same wave against the same shore, in which, however, as each return recapitulates itself, it also infinitely renews and enriches itself” (WD 398). The interruptive step of parabasis reverses the transmutation of alterity into sameness that occurs in philosophical systems, and instead uses the (apparently) same to sign towards the other in alterity. The fragments form a “seriality of derangement”, a series of mutually interrupting, parabolic repetitions where “one must hear each philosopheme deranged, dislocated, disarticulated, made inadequate and anterior to itself, absolutely anarchic to everything that is said about it” (AM 170).

This fragmentary disorder is heightened when one looks back to Levinas’s earlier texts on art and the aesthetic which are vehement in their denunciation of a use of language that obscures and distorts reality. Yet the terms that condemn and denote irresponsibility *are the same terms* that later praise a responsible turn

metalinguistic commentary or descriptive quotation; “Lyotard says, or mentions, or uses, ‘close the door’”.

The problem expressed in Levinas’s work is that if the commentator understands the work, then she does not understand it, and if she does not understand it, then she understands it. While the classic example of the problematic can be likened to the impossibility of the order “Disobey!”, the paradox is also found in the simple “Obey!”. “Obey!” is an interrupted order, an injunction to obey the order previously received, or, of course, the order to come. “Obey!” is itself an empty proposition, it cannot itself be executed; it is that which renders all orders executory. It demands immediate conformity without any specific content located in its present time – the content of the order has passed or is to come. In the present one must simply obey without information or understanding, one exists to obey, one hears and obeys. “Obey” is a fragment, an interrupted, ironic injunction. (Jean-François Lyotard, “Levinas’ Logic”, *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986).)

towards the other. Thus what in a single text seems open and unambiguous becomes haunted by irony and iterability. In “Reality and its Shadow” terms like *passivity*, *loss of initiative*, and the *non-cognitive*, terms that in *Otherwise than Being* denote ethical responsibility, are used to decry its absence. Vocabulary remains the same, but there is an absolute anacoluthon, an interruption in the shape of a reversal in polarity. Levinas’s later texts hence radically interrupt and rewrite his earlier texts, and, as Critchley argues, form “a series of *palaeonymic displacements*, where the ancient words of the tradition are repeated and in the iterability of that repetition semantically transformed”.⁷³ Levinas’s writing, both in relation to his own texts and the texts of the philosophical canon, performs a radical, ironic interruption.⁷⁴

The difficulty of the act of producing the *unsaid* means that Levinas’s terms function like *pharmaka*; medicine and poison, responsible and irresponsible, ethical and unethical, as the saying and the said have to inhabit the same linguistic space. Levinas’s faulty, parabolic style employs a poetic, ironic mode of expression that is the permanent parabasis of the “incessant unsaying of the said” (OB 181), and which attempts, if not to *wholly* unsay the said, then to step as close to saying as possible.⁷⁵ Thus Levinas is obliged to write, for example: “Saying *states* and *thematizes* the said, but signifies it to the other, a neighbour, with a signification that has to be distinguished from that borne by words in the said” [emphasis added] (OB 46). Despite saying’s absolutely antithetical position to statements and thematisations, such terms are sometimes required to demonstrate and thereby perform the turn operating between the saying and the said. When the saying “states” or “thematizes” – as a trace in the said – it

⁷³ Critchley, *Ethics-Politics* 75.

⁷⁴ Gerald L. Bruns analyses art and poetry in Levinas in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, although he reads Levinas’s engagement as more sustained and systematic, arguing that Levinas sees the aesthetic as one of darkness. See “The Concepts of Art and Poetry in Emmanuel Levinas’s Writings”, *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*.

⁷⁵ Alphonso Lingis’s translation of “*dédit du Dit*” as “unsaying the said” adds a paradoxical element to the phrase. Comparatively the French expression translates as “unsaid the said” and avoids the confusion which occurs in English when one is forced to “unsay the said”. In English complications arise because to “unsay” implies to move away from the saying, which would, if possible, intensify the saidness of the said. If we retain the term “say” we have to rather hear “say the said”, that is, move the said towards the saying, or more logically, using said, “unsaid the said”. While the latter presents the correct sense, it opens a temporal dilemma, as it renders the action in the past tense, and adds, if this can be said, an element of the diachronic, of the already passed. In English “unsay the said” takes a parabolic step which hyphenates it to what it is not – it is both a movement towards and away from the saying.

interrupts the said, and the “normal” functioning of terms. The saying and the said exist in ironic hyphenation.

Levinas’s language is an ironic mixture of the poetic and the sceptical. Scepticism, as a position of extreme doubt, rewrites Socrates’ “I only know that I do know not” as “None of us knows anything, not even this, whether we know or do not know”.⁷⁶ The sceptical “states the rupture, failure, impotence or impossibility of discourse” (OB 168), and is audacious enough to “affirm the impossibility of statement while venturing to *realise* this impossibility by the very statement of this impossibility” (OB 7). Scepticism is that which turns in on itself, which persists through promise and perjury, as each negative or doubtful statement is always also a promise or affirmation: “[I affirm that] It is false”, “[I affirm that] We do not know”. There is thus always an interruption or disjunction within the sceptical statement, an interval or abyss between affirmation and negation. Scepticism is that which recognises and retains interruption: it is a “refusal to synchronise the implicit affirmation contained in saying and the negation which this affirmation states in the said” (OB 167). This interruption is double – it is a negative proposition interrupted by a positive affirmation, *and* the act of saying interrupted by – and interrupting – the content of the said. There can never be a last word, as while the said is the final content, it is ironically interrupted by the final act of exposure.⁷⁷ The exposure and the content operate in ironic counterpoint and “do not resound in the same time” (OB 168): they are ironically hyphenated as they are brought together and kept apart. Thus for Levinas is it not the contamination of the saying and the said that is important, it is the radical anacoluthic interruption or disjuncture that occurs *within* the contamination. The contrapuntal diachrony within the contamination or shared space is what prevents scepticism from being simply self-contradictory. It is the permanent interruption and “permanent return” (OB 171) of ironic permanent parabasis; “it recommences as soon as one interrupts it” (OB 169). “Language”, writes Levinas, “is already scepticism” (OB 170): interrupted, interrupting, it goes on.

The interruptive force of scepticism is explicitly tied to irony by Blanchot in *The Writing of the Disaster*:

⁷⁶ Bernasconi attributes this to Metrodorus of Chios in “Skepticism” 150.

⁷⁷ See Jan de Greef, “Skepticism and Reason”, *Face to Face with Levinas* 159-79.

Scepticism, a noun that has crossed out its etymology and all etymology, is not indubitable doubt; it is not simply nihilist negation: rather, irony. Scepticism is in relation with the refutation of scepticism. ... Scepticism is indeed the return of the refuted, that which erupts anarchically, capriciously, and irregularly each time (at the same time not each time) that authority and the sovereignty of reason, indeed of unreason, impose their order on us or organise themselves definitively in a system. Scepticism does not destroy the system; it destroys nothing; it is a sort of gaiety without laughter, in any case without mockery, which suddenly makes us uninterested in affirmation, in negation: thus it is neutral like all language. (ED 76-77)

In crossing out etymology scepticism erases beginnings and definitional meaning. A permanent parabasis of proposition and refutation, statement and rebuttal, there is neither a first nor final word, just an interruption that takes place without contact or contemporaneity. For Blanchot it does not *destroy* the system but reveals the system to be already interrupted by its own asystematicity, already contaminated by alterity, already undone and incomplete. The neutrality that this leads to for Blanchot is not, however, where Levinas would have it lead; scepticism and irony are for Levinas a subversion of essence that overflow the said and lead not to neutrality or the *il y a*, but to the saying, to an ethical discourse. The impossibility simultaneity of meaning in (sceptical) language leads to the responsible, contradictory voice of the excluded middle in a (non)place which “would exceed the limits of what is thought, by suggesting, letting be understood without ever making understandable” (OB 169). This is language that ironically interrupts itself in what Derrida calls a *serisire*, an interrupted series whose meaning does not comprise a whole and is noncontemporaneous. This is sceptical, ironic, responsible language.

Ironic Interruptions

Levinas’s ethics is an ironic ethics of interruption, whereby, as Derrida writes, interruption is that which “regularly puts an end to the authority of the Said, the thematical, the dialectical, the same, the economical, and so on, what demarcates itself from this series so as to go *right straight* beyond essence: to the Other, toward the Other other” (AM 163). Interruption is represented in *Otherwise than Being* by the image of a knot. As Robbins explains, in rabbinical interpretation, “Knots are cruxes – hidden meanings, sometimes mystical meanings – that need to be untied. But ... untying a knot merely produces another knot; untying is

inseparable from retying, and the unravelling is always a re-knotting”.⁷⁸ The logical discourse of the said will always contain knots, points of complexity and excess, which it will try to smooth over by ignoring or cutting. But these points cannot be eradicated; once cut their trace will remain in the new join between the threads. “Does not the discourse that suppresses the interruptions of discourse by relating them maintain the discontinuity under the knots with which the thread is tied again?” (OB 170) Thus the said interrupts the saying – the logical discourse attempts to suppress the unthematisable excess – *and* the saying interrupts the said, as each logical discourse steps up, despite itself, to the other.

This interruption “is true of the discussion I am elaborating at this very moment” (OB 170). The phrase “at this very moment”, entitles Derrida’s essay, in which he reveals how the repetition of the phrase turns its urgent and immediate present into anachrony and dislocation – each “now” is a different “now”. “At this very moment” – Levinas’s phrase and Derrida’s essay – repeats so as to dislocate. Within each moment is *contretemps*, an ironic, contrapuntal relation. The first instance takes a step that marks a strong, thematised, stable statement – “now” – only for the second instance to show that the step was not, that “now” is neither strong, thematisable or stable. For Derrida the instances of the phrase form an ironic, fragmentary series, a *seriasure* (*sériature*) – a series under erasure (*rature*) – “a series (a stringed sequence of enlaced *erasures*), an interrupted series, a *series* of interlaced interruptions, a series of *hiatuses* (mouths agape, mouth opened to the broken-off word, or to the gift of the other and to the bread-in-his-mouth)” (AM 175). In this way the said becomes unbound, or, more accurately, less bound, found to contain a necessary, ethical interruption, or *fault*.

A series of interruptions functions like a paratactic series, in which the “absolute paradox (of the ab-solute) is that *this series*, incommensurable with any other, an incomparable series out-of-series [*hors-série*] does not tie together threads but the interruptions between threads, traces of intervals that the knot must only remark, give to be remarked” (AM 165). In this ironic parataxis it is not the marks that are joined, but the interruptions or gaps between the marks. This is a series of (k)nots, a series of the abyss, that “does not re-tie threads but the interruptions without-thread, leaving open the interruptions between interruptions” (AM 165). It does not join the thematisable but the non-thematisable, it makes

⁷⁸ Robbins 140.

chains of fragments that do not house meaning but approach the other. And this not only explains how Levinas writes *Otherwise than Being*, it determines the mode in which Derrida must respond. Derrida writes:

this is how he fabricates the fabric of his work, interrupting the weave of our language and then weaving together the interruptions themselves, [so that] another language comes to disturb the first one. It doesn't inhabit it, but haunts it. Another text, the text of the other, without ever appearing in its original language, arrives in silence with a more or less regular cadence to dislocate the language of translation, to convert the version, turn it inside out, bend it to the very thing it pretends to import. (AM 152-53)

Levinas writes through ironic anacoluthon, a writing of interruption that contains the syncopation or counterpoint of meanings, the said and the trace of the saying. The different beat within the grammar of the said opens it “to the Other, outside of theme, outside presence, beyond the circle of the Same, beyond Being” (AM 160).

Interrupting the series within Levinas's text is the gift that Derrida gives to Levinas in the form of the essay/quotation “At This Very Moment”. In order to respond responsibly, and avoid the cycle of debt and restitution, Derrida argues that his response must be one of *ingratitude*, one which does not inscribe Levinas's work within the thematisable same but acknowledges alterity. “If I retribute, if I retribute without fault, I am at fault. And if I do not retribute, by *giving* beyond acknowledgement, I risk the fault” (AM 147). Derrida's gift must interrupt Levinas and present the faulty writing of an ironic seriesure. So, in a filigree of parabolic irony Derrida links “gestures or moments that do not let themselves be linked, which are absolutely singular each time” (N 30). He negotiates the paratactic chain of singularities, putting “in a series things that do not let themselves be put in a series” (N 30).

In order to ethically respond to Levinas, Derrida moves in a parabolic, paratactic series from “he”/“*il*”, to “E. L.”, to “she”/“*elle*”.⁷⁹ He responds not to E. L (Emmanuel Levinas, among others) but to *elle*, passing his gift on to the female voice ignored by Levinas's text. Writing as the other – writing as a woman –

⁷⁹ These marks, woven together in Derrida's responsible, erased series, are “intr(el)aced” – “entre(*el*)lacement” [“between”, “el”, “laced”]. Intr(el)acing, which can be thought of as a neologistic synonym for hyphenation, brings together in interruption the said and the saying, the same and the other. Crocheted between each word or phrase is the undecidable, the *el* that is Emmanuel Levinas, God (AM 187), *il* (he/it), *elle* (she), the neuter, the specific. Thus the undecidable is inscribed within each interlacing, a permanent interruption or parabasis that exists as a trace within each syntactical weaving. The syntactic is interrupted, and shown to operate as parataxis, as a weaving of marks and spaces.

Derrida argues that the default subject in Levinas' work is a masculine subject, a subject that is not to be opposed to the feminine subject, but an *arche* subject predating sexual difference. The other may be sexually undecidable, but is nonetheless *He*. If first comes *He*, and then the he/she of sexual difference is made secondary. And if sexual difference is derivative and secondary to the primary and originary *He*, woman is also – *even more so* – subordinate and dependent. The same is privileged over the other, and Levinas's text can be seen to reduce and restrict alterity and the other. Thus Derrida describes the fault, and writing as a woman, *performs* the response to the fault, giving voice to the other other. And hence, the female voice asks, should we not reinscribe the line with which Derrida's essay began – “he will have obligated” (AM 143) – with “it [*elle*] will have obligated” (AM 188)?

“It will have obligated” – an epigraph, a subtitle, and a phrase used and mentioned in Derrida's text. In the future perfect tense, obligation reaches us without having ever existed in the present – suddenly an event in the future changes the past. Hearing the phrase “it will have obligated” places the listener in a present under siege, attacked from the future and the past. Derrida repeats the sentence, placing it in a series that moves the “he” from the abstract to the specific, that is, to Levinas. As we receive the sentence each time slightly differently we are obliged to interrupt each reading, fragmenting the sentence through excess, stepping from the general *he*, to the specific *he* of Levinas, and off again to the other *she*.

“It will have obligated”, with its invisible, directionless, contentless apostrophe – it will have obligated me? you? them? – is not a phrase that meaning can comfortably inhabit. Again we see the structure of the beyond/within:

He will have obligated – at a distance from every context ... because of a certain *inside* of what is said and the saying of what is said *in* the sentence, and that, from within, if this may still be said, infinitely *overflows* at a stroke all possible context. (AM 144)

This phrase gives no stable point of entry; it is *a priori* interrupted and incomplete. Not only is it temporally adrift, but it awaits further information: he will have obligated [pronoun] to [verb] [object]? As such “it will have obligated” is an exemplary phrase of ironic responsibility: in a time that disrupts temporality, there is responsibility. Without having made a choice, there is responsibility. Without

knowledge or specific limitation, there is responsibility. “It will have obligated” is not a descriptive, instructive injunction, but an indefinite, undecidable and therefore absolute statement and performance of responsibility. It constatively describes – although the description is curtailed – while also performatively producing a responsibility that has always existed. In so doing, it demonstrates a mode of the performative, or perperformative, *that operates outside the present*. Derrida writes that in order to engage with Levinas’s work, one would need “a writing that performs, but with a performative without present (who has ever defined such a performative?), one that answers for his, a performative without a present event, a performative whose essence cannot be resumed in presence” (AM 173). A performative without the present, and without the first person. This ironic, perperformative is found in “he/she/it will have obligated” – a sentence of performative, constative responsibility that does not contain “I”, and that takes place without having taken place in the present. The answer it begs is the answer of the ethical statement – “here I am”, or, in ironic parataxis, “you, you, you”. An answer that offers without content, that has the mystery of “God will provide” or “I would prefer not to” but with absolute responsible signification. “Interrupt me” (AM 188).

Quotation marks proliferate throughout Levinas’s text, a series woven into a structure that spatially and temporally displaces it – an ironic, aphoristic series. What Derrida refers to as the “infinite law of quotation marks” (AM 172), the ironic counterlaw of contradictory punctuation points,⁸⁰ is that which makes the work open to the borderless context of endless reference, but still makes reference to the other:

The infinite law of quotation marks seems to suspend all reference and to enclose the work on the borderless context that it gives to itself: yet here is this law making absolute reference to the commandment of the wholly other, obligating beyond any delimitable context. (AM 172)

The phrase within quotation marks is neither use nor mention, neither rigorously attributed to a different, specific author nor opened to a morass of general referentiality, a language always mentioned but never used. A phrase exists, like a fragment, in absolute isolation while wholly conjoined to language, to the new use,

⁸⁰ See chapter four.

the old mention, the self and the other. The proliferation of quotation marks does not return the work to the same, but signifies an ironic dislocation which is “found in the interior without inside of language” that is “opened to the outside of the wholly other” (AM 172): *beyond/within*. Thus language speaks while ironically interrupting itself, parabolically “drawing it [its language] along while leaving it in place” (AM 154).

Whence the essential function of a quotation, its unique setting to work that, by quoting the uncitable, consists in accusing language, in quoting it in its entirety to appear *at the same time* as witness and as accused within its limits, (sur)rendered to a gift, *as* a gift to which language cannot open up on its own. (AM 154)

Derrida's example is Levinas's formulation of the responsible subject, where “I” is replaced with “here I am”. Or, more accurately, ““here I am””. Even when used “here I am” takes quotation marks; it is both speech that presents itself as immediacy, and the representation or quotation of speech. Thus when mentioned a double set of quotation marks is required. By making the first person pronoun a quotation at the very moment of its first use, we recognise that the subject can never say “I” in full, authoritative self-presence, but is always, even in the first person, distanced from itself. “Here I am”, Derrida writes, “is not the complacent exhibition of the self but the unreserved exposition of its still secret secret” (AM 154). As a quotation the self exists anachronistically, out of time and out of synchronisation. The responsible subject gives herself over to the other and is there only for the other, but this giving is not an act on which the subject can found a self-present identity. Instead the self can only repeat and quote herself in (ir)responsibility. By replacing the self-present pronoun with a quotation, the grammar of the sentence is retained, but is also contaminated by an agrammaticality that interrupts as it quotes the unquotable; a subject that is (a) subjected and therefore cannot be fully grammatically placed. Recognising the first person pronoun to be “here I am” and therefore always a quotation places a stress upon language that causes it to ironically step beyond itself by stepping into itself. Thus, as Derrida writes, the phrase “here I am” “forces language into a contract with the stranger, with what it can only incorporate without assimilating” (AM 154).

Ethical Fragments⁸¹

Derrida's essay/citation "At This Very Moment" ends with an (almost) impenetrable fragment, a short text printed in the capital letters of screamed urgency or sonorous slowness, split – refragmented – at "random" points by an italicised wave. It is a demanding text, obliging the reader to negotiate the paths of an untraceable pattern, an intricate lacework of paradoxes and ambiguities. It is a text of ironic, paratactic hyphenation, a chorus of interruption that never ends: there is no full stop, just the final, life-and-death injunction to drink. Drink and live. Drink and assimilate, and thereby destroy. Drink in the metaphor, learn it by heart.

Responsibility is impossibly demanding, requiring an impossible negotiation between obligations. Derrida's final fragment does not describe the paradoxes of duty and commitment, nor does it outline ways of accommodating conflicting claims. It is instead a performance of the urgent and irreconcilable dictates made upon us; the multiple, contradictory paths it presents are the aporetic paths of (ir)responsible engagement. A cryptic text, a step *beyond, within*, it approaches Levinas's texts, and Derrida's own texts, beyond logic, beyond measure, beyond the propositional. It pulls the reader in multiple directions, and presents no easy path, no simple answer. It is thereby a performance of the infinite task – the impossible task – of responding to obligation.

The fragment is near impossible to summarise, but Critchley outlines it as follows: a female speaker calls to a male other to join her in burying her daughter, who personifies the faulty text, the "she" which interrupts the jealous "he". Together they bury her, and the fault thereby dissolves in "the bottomless crypt of the Same, within an economy that makes sexual difference secondary".⁸² The fragment ends as the woman begs for a new body that allows for alterity, and does not need to be buried. Critchley's reading is not inaccurate, although he is rather too quick to assign gender and identity to the speakers. There is also a contradiction in his formulation of the effects of the burial: he proposes that placing the text/daughter in the ground "render[s] the fault illegible"⁸³ and means

⁸¹ For a full text (English and French) of the fragment see Appendix ii. Page numbers are all AM 188-89.

⁸² Critchley, *Ethics* 140-41.

⁸³ Critchley, *Ethics* 140.

that “ethical alterity has been maintained”.⁸⁴ However, the fading of a fault does not preserve alterity; it reduces it to the same, and requires a new interruption. As the preceding fragments states: “I no longer hear your voice, your fault suddenly becomes illegible to me. Interrupt me” (AM 188).

However, beyond any specific disagreements about content, what Critchley’s neat summary has done is change the non-hierarchical parataxis of the text to a brief, ordered syntax. There is no reading (of this text) that fails to do so; a reading is a singular engagement that is both new event *and* act of reduction. As Derrida’s fragment is a performance of the difficulty of responsibility, a critical engagement should demonstrate the multiple pathways and multiple obligations that (ir)responsible engagement presents. This section therefore attempts to read the (unreadable) fragment while retaining irony and alterity, negotiating the unnegotiable and exegetically describing/re-presenting a performance of ironic (ir)responsibility. It does not argue that the incomprehensible or secret is automatically more “ethical”, but that the complications and conflicts of responsibility and obligation should be acknowledged rather than repressed. It attempts then to be responsible, and to present the different threads of the fragment(s), knowing that it misses myriad possibilities and reduces the potentiality of those it recognises. Rather than listing the allusions to and inversions of Levinas’s texts – knots, faults, “here I am”, “at this very moment”, the (female) other, the third etc – it concentrates on the contradictions that the fragment presents, acknowledging that each reading is an invention, and the promise of another reading still to come. It thus first addresses the temporal, grammatical and logical contradictions of the content, and then the aporias and incongruities arising from the – falsely separated – form.

“HERE AT THIS VERY MOMENT I ROLL UP THE BODY OF OUR INTERLACED VOICES FAULTY CONSONANTS VOWELS ACCENTS IN THIS MANUSCRIPT.” The speaker – singular or plural – places a body – body as text written in/on the manuscript, body (as text) rolled up in the manuscript – into the ground, allowing it to slowly dissolve into the earth. According to Derrida, presenting Levinas’s reading of the Talmud, once inscribed the name of God cannot be erased, even if it is misused or misplaced within a text. Like a dead body, the text must instead be buried, allowed to decompose in a work of mourning that enables the other to

⁸⁴ Critchley, *Ethics* 141.

remain other. The word to be buried in this fragment is, however, not the (traditional) name of God but a nameless, mute, female other produced by the interwoven voices of a (parabolic) chorus. She, the other, is singular, wholly human, wholly female, but her body (also) comprises the faulty language of her parents, her producers, her speakers. She is the text of her predecessors' fault, she *is* her inheritance. Stillborn, dead before she lived, tainted by an incestuous union – the sin of the same – she is placed within the ground, a sacrifice to the other.

Because of the fault, we are told, because of the fault of the female, the fault of the incest, the fault of the same, the fault of alterity, the fault of the interwoven voices, the fault of misreading (Levinas), there is total destruction: “BY FAULT OF HER BODY SHE WILL HAVE LET HERSELF BE DESTROYED ONE DAY AND WITHOUT REMAINDER”. However, the destruction without a trace is to come in the past/future of the future perfect, in the time of a temporal disjunction or exigency. One day, in an unspecified future, she will have been destroyed in an unspecified past, but until that day of the future/past, of interrupted, aphoristic time, one can hope that, even in death, the girl will protect herself (and her fault/erase her fault). For now there is “NO LONGER ENOUGH DIFFERENCE THERE BETWEEN THEM BETWEEN THE FEMININE INHUMED OR THE ASHES OF A BURN-EVERYTHING”. Buried or burnt, slowly dissolving in the ground – the space of alterity? the same? – or swiftly consumed by fire – the flame of difference? homogeneity? – the trace – of a sort – remains. “Ash”, writes Derrida, “is the figure of annihilation without remainder, without memory, or without a readable or decipherable archive” (SQ 68). It is the “remains of what does not remain” (SQ 42), and as such is nothing: “There is ash, perhaps, but an ash is not” (SQ 43). And yet ash, which is not and is unreadable, which “annihilates or threatens to annihilate even the *possibility* of bearing witness to the annihilation” (SQ 69), is also the condition of possibility for witnessing, as (the possibility of) erasure is what makes witnessing necessary and valuable. Ashes are not, and yet they are a remnant (that enable). They are a trace and not, a catastrophic remnant of erased singularity that does and does not bear witness. The body of the daughter returns to the earth, eradicated and yet remaining, a marker of difference and sameness, a trace or no trace, preserved/abolished. The dissolution, if it is such, is slow, and so the (Abrahamic?) sacrifice is a gift that delays the time of restitution and places, insofar as it is possible, the gift outside economy as it remains until the impossible time of the interrupted future/perfect.

Even though “YOU ALWAYS KNEW THAT SHE IS THE PROPER BODY OF THE FAULT”, “SHE WILL ONLY HAVE BEEN CALLED BY HER LEGIBLE NAME BY YOU AND IN THAT IN ADVANCE DISAPPEARED”. Despite knowing, sensing, that the text/daughter/gift is beyond language, she is now constrained by language, and can only be referred to by her legible name, by linguistic signs and marks of the said. She is thus betrayed, reduced to a shadow, made to disappear by being made appear(ant). But in the “BOTTOMLESS CRYPT” of the ground/language “THE INDECIPHERABLE STILL GIVES ONE TO READ”. The trace remains; one betrays the indecipherable saying by attempting to decipher it, one has failed before one has begun, but through the process something slips in, contraband ironically hyphenated to the said.

The parabasis states that it is always the other who gives – for better or for worse we inherit from the other – and the other who hears better: “YOU HEAR HER BETTER THAN ME AHEAD OF ME”. The other is, with absolute alterity, undecidable; other and other other, male, female, third. Finally what is asked for is a new body, a new work, a new text, a new step that is without jealousy, that doesn’t need to acquire or keep or possess or guard, that opens the blinds to alterity and the other. And so Derrida gives to Levinas – and the reader – a faulty, fragmented text that attempts to respond in alterity, in ingratitude, in (ir)responsibility. It is the gift of a perperformative, a perperformative outside the present that produces an event of (ir)responsibility.

The temporal, aphoristic disjunctions of the text proliferate, presenting a non-synchronised syncopation, a counterpoint in contretemps. Injunctions and requests are made impossible; the present tense of the order/suggestion “COME BEND DOWN” is disrupted by the future perfect of the description of the gestures, which “WILL HAVE HAD” an inconsolable slowness. The deceased child/text “WILL HAVE LET HERSELF BE DESTROYED ONE DAY AND WITHOUT REMAINDER”. Her death/destruction takes place in the ironic, interruptive temporality of the future perfect, and yet this future/past death that destroys without remainder – and which is not the same as the stillborn death she has already undergone – does not rob her of a present or a future tense. She is dead now, but not destroyed: “ALREADY SHE LETS HERSELF BE EATEN” – present tense – by “BY THE OTHER BY YOU WHO WILL HAVE GIVEN HER TO ME” – future perfect tense. Before the action in the future/past she is ready and prepared, awaiting the other in death, in

her “BOTTOMLESS CRYPT”. Stillborn, she dies before she lives, her death aphoristically precedes her life. She dies of an incest – perhaps – an incest *promised*, and thus the cause of her death is itself yet to come. Time – “at this very moment” – is interrupted, fragmented and refragmented.

The 14 fragments of the fragment are separated by an italicised wave that ambiguously denotes an absence, a section buried or burnt, *and/or* a break that was always so, a fault not secondary or subsequent but always extant. The fragments, like the post cards of “Envois”, thus present a faulty and inconclusive originality: ash precedes us? “Ash awaits us” (SQ 20)? The hyphenation of the wave conjoins and separates fragments that appear complete and logically sequential – “I MUST PUT IT IN THE EARTH FOR YOU ~ COME BEND DOWN” – and fragments that appear to run into each other – “ALREADY SHE LETS HERSELF BE EATEN ~ BY THE OTHER BY YOU”. The interruptions are sometimes violent, sometimes invisible, and the traits of the wave are (inversely) reflected in the parataxis within.⁸⁵

SHE DOES NOT SPEAK THE UNNAMED ONE YET YOU HEAR HER BETTER
THAN ME AHEAD OF ME AT THIS VERY MOMENT WHERE NONETHELESS
ONE THE OTHER SIDE OF THIS MONUMENTAL WORK I WEAVE WITH MY
VOICE SO AS TO BE ERASED THERE THIS TAKE IT HERE I AM EAT

The proper and the improper anacoluthically interrupt each other and the text, and yet the anacoluthon itself is faulty, as the unexpected changes in syntax, the constant turns and interruptions cease to disorient the reader and instead become familiar and prosaic. As the fragment preceding this states, “your fault suddenly becomes illegible to me” (AM 188). Hence the request/command: “Interrupt me” (AM 188). Without a new parabolic step, a new interruption, the text given over to alterity is always in danger of returning to the same. Parataxis is always in danger of becoming syntax, and the knots of language and meaning concealed.

We require, according to the fragment, “A NEW BODY ANOTHER WITHOUT ANY MORE JEALOUSY THE MOST ANCIENT STILL TO COME”, the oldest who is yet to come and thereby also the youngest, the body of a temporal exigency, the body of a faulty, ironic time. “PLUS DE JALOUSIE” is *more* and *no more jealousy*, while *jalousie* translates both as “jealousy” and “slatted blinds”,⁸⁶ a green eyed monster

⁸⁵ All reflections are inversions.

⁸⁶ “Jalousie” remains a term in English for slatted blinds.

obstructing the view, or imposing a certain view. More and no more blinds, more and no more retention. The fragmentary text attempts to be a gift that tries to delay time and restitution, a gift inscribed within the double, parabolic movement of more and no more jealousy. The female voice of a preceding fragment writes “I give and play ingratitude against jealousy” (AM 187) – I parabolically play a step away/beyond against a step within. But ingratitude guards itself zealously, a “without-jealousy [that] jealously guards and keeps itself, otherwise said, loses itself, keeps-itself-loses-itself” (AM 187-188). No more jealousy is always more jealousy: jealousy is an anacoluthon, an interruption, a hyphenation.⁸⁷

The fragment, spoken in response – perhaps – to the order/request “Interrupt me” (AM 188), is voice or voices, voices in unison or voices in sequence, that step up to the audience, to you. The apostrophe – a parabasis – explains, defends, describes, and implicates, as the child, the manuscript – the script of the play – is “OUR MUTE INFANT”. The gift – the text, “THE BODY OF OUR INTERLACED VOICES” – is laid in the ground, laid before “YOU”, and yet received in the future/past of the future perfect tense from “YOU”: “YOU WHO WILL HAVE GIVEN HER TO ME”. The parabasis, spoken by an undecidable voice or voices, addresses all and none, a fragmented series under erasure of interlaced, interwoven voices that speaks in the singular first person. It speaks for the text/girl, speaks with the text/girl, speaks as the text/girl, making of everyone an other turned to and from in (ir)responsibility. Like/as the text/girl, the parabasis offers itself/herself/themselves: “ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THIS MONUMENTAL WORK I WEAVE WITH MY VOICE SO AS TO BE ERASED THERE THIS TAKE IT HERE I AM EAT”. Eat what I offer, eat, what I am I offer, eat. Or, as well as or instead, let us add to or interrupt the eating. Instead, for now, at this very faulty, interrupted moment, let us “COME CLOSER”, let us “DRINK”. The parabasis steps up, steps closer, turning from the mode in which “SHE LETS HERSELF BE EATEN” and instead moving – commanding – to drink, to swallow, to take in whole, to take all. Learn me by heart. Thus Derrida presents, in ironic time and fragmentary interruption, the conflicts and impossible demands – demands that are equally impossible to ignore – of responsibility.

⁸⁷ For more on jealousy see Peggy Kamuf’s introduction to *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) xiii-xlii.

Ironic Inter-Views: Autobiography and Self-Defence

Introduction

In 2001 Derrida declared that “the media is the main political problem facing the world today”.¹ Ludovic Glorieux and Indira Hašimbegović state that it was precisely the problem of the media that led them to compile *Derrida: Negotiating the Legacy*.

It was a question of not allowing these [media obituaries] to become definitive; to respond in order to defeat those biting epigraphs. Tinted by misunderstanding and ill-advised criticism, displaying a malignant wit and vicious satire, some journalists found the silence of the philosopher a weak point to exploit. Condemning his thought as “obscurantism”, of being “murky”, “enigmatic” or self-contradictory, *The New York Times* and *The Economist* made remarkable efforts to denigrate his work.²

While the media in general was problematic for Derrida, this chapter focuses on a particular media trait that spread across genres and disciplines: *the interview*. “Ah interviews! Yes, I have always suffered from the laws of the interview. After several decades, I really must recognise that I have too often done what I said I didn’t like doing” (PM 136). The law of the media interview is a rule of speed, summary, directness, plainness, sound-bites, and transmittable, translatable units. This chapter proposes that the *laws of the interview* brought about a self-relation that can be termed *autoimmune*, and that together these laws and self-relation played a significant role in bringing about a stylistic shift in Derrida’s later work. The general demand for reduction masquerading as clarity, speed simulating inspiration and the anecdotal as the explanatory resulted in a relation between Derrida and deconstruction that is autoimmune.

The autoimmunity stemming from the media interview is echoed in the *autobiographical inter-view*. The autobiography is an ironic, fragmentary, autobiothanatoheterographical opus, a writing that exposes itself and erases itself,

¹ Jacques Derrida, “Discussion”, *Deconstruction Engaged: The Sydney Seminars*, ed. Paul Patton and Terry Smith (Sydney: Power Publications, 2001) 45. In an interview first published in *Le Monde* in 1982 Derrida is somewhat milder, saying that the problem is not the media in general, but the normalisation, and thereby silencing, of the media that takeovers and conglomerates cause. Specifically, however, the media’s first problem is always exclusion, of what does not get published or translated (P 87). One might add that in 1982 Derrida had not personally suffered the worst onslaughts of the press.

² Ludovic Glorieux and Indira Hašimbegović, “Introduction: Inheriting Deconstruction, Surviving Derrida”, *Derrida: Negotiating the Legacy* 1.

presenting and absenting itself in autoimmunity. Interview and inter-view function through the step of protection and exposure, life and death, possibility and impossibility, force of weakness that is (ironic) autoimmunity. Derrida's text *Circumfession* (1991) is read as the ironic hyphenation of the interview/inter-view, as Derrida engages with the presentation of his work through the countersignature of an other. He responds to himself and counterexample(s) of himself, and frees himself from the programmatic restriction of Bennington's *Derridabase* by proffering a periphrastic, circumlocutory, fragmentary text of contaminated Thoughts/thoughts. *Circumfession* is seen to be exemplary of structural irony, of the parataxis, hyphenation, parabasis and fragmentation that this thesis has outlined.

Derrida's Later Style

The ironic contamination within Derrida's texts – the thetic and the non-thetic, the constative and the performative, the literary and the philosophical – renders definite comments on his style near impossible.³ Given his denial of “a *political* or *ethical turn* in ‘deconstruction’” (R 39), it is equally difficult to make definitive comments regarding his work's themes or periods. Geoffrey Bennington states that Derrida's *oeuvre*, remarkable, he writes, for its consistency and diversity, “cannot be divided into styles or periods: even the quite widespread idea that there are first of all very philosophical texts and then, after *Glas* (1974), a more ‘literary’ and less ‘serious’ tendency, is doubtful as to its empirical accuracy and irrelevant to our understanding” (DB 13-14).⁴ Derrida's style in particular has garnered

³ The contamination between genres is described perfectly by Derrida in an interview in 1975, when the interviewer attempts to divide Derrida's texts into three category types:

theoretical or critical texts of a relatively classical form ...; interventions on certain political or institutional questions ...; and more wide-ranging texts which are unclassifiable according to normal standards ... in which you implicate yourself, along with your “body”, your “desire”, your “phantasms”, in a ways that perhaps no philosopher has ever done until now. (P 5)

Derrida responded by saying that

in the texts you classify as “theoretical” ..., the demonstration inasmuch as it is effective in classical terms, is constantly overrun, carried beyond itself by a scene of language, of counter-signature run adrift, of smuggled-in fiction (generally either unreadable or neglected) which affiliated it with texts that you have classified differently, with *Glas* for example. (P 17)

⁴ Although this was written in 1991.

enough comments to fill numerous books: Vincent Leitch, for example, describes Derrida's style as giving "the appearance of being thrown together like preliminary thinking exercises, lacking editing ... and careful organisation, performances that amble loosely, sometimes stunningly".⁵ Nicholas Royle describes Derrida's language as a "spectral machine, yes, a mad line drawing, with remarkable hatching, done blind, or else, but this is not an alternative, a luscious, furiously green grass field featuring mole hills with, in places, see-through cross sections".⁶ But, as his career progressed to what Herman Rapaport carefully terms the "so-called later Derrida",⁷ is it not possible to argue that his language, style and approach grew somewhat less "mad", less "blind" and less "loose", with cross-sections that were rather more "see-through"? This is absolutely not to suggest that Derrida's work grew less engaged, less academic, less thorough, but that the tendency to have, as the *overt* approach, a singularly or deliberately "playful", experimental style decreases towards the end of Derrida's career. This is not, again and of course, to say that Derrida's later texts consistently espoused a dry, denotative mode of exposition, but that in his later works vocabularies, allusions, and themes began to change, an overt ethical and political engagement takes precedent, and images of technology, medicine, justice, democracy, human rights come to the forefront.

Phrases change, for example while the phrase *il faut* (one must) figures repeatedly in his later texts – figures to the point whereby in her introduction to *Negotiations* Elizabeth Rottenberg writes of "the never-ending, unrelenting 'il faut' of deconstruction" (N 1) – in 1976 he referred to it as an "ethico-pedagogico-professorial prescription" (P 19) that should be avoided.⁸ In *Derrida and the Time of the Political* Pheng Cheah and Suzanne Guerlac "insist on a visible mutation in Derrida's writings since the late 1980s",⁹ while J. Hillis Miller states that "Derrida wrote so much about politics in his last decades that it might even be possible to assert (not quite truthfully) that he became almost exclusively a political philosopher, a political theorist, or even a political scientist in the strict,

⁵ Vincent B. Leitch, "Late Derrida: The Politics of Sovereignty", *Critical Inquiry* 33 (2007) 231.

⁶ Nicholas Royle, *Memory* 92.

⁷ Herman Rapaport, *Later Derrida: Reading the Recent Work* (Routledge: New York, 2003) vii.

⁸ The shift in meaning of terms and phrases of Derrida's work of course proves the iterability of the mark, but also indicates that rather than a concentration on isolated marks or units, these components should be read in isolation *and* conjunction – through parataxis.

⁹ Pheng Cheah and Suzanne Guerlac, "Introduction" *Derrida and the Time of the Political* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009) 6.

disciplinary sense”.¹⁰ Tom Cohen goes so far as to propose that Derrida “artefacted a ‘late Derrida’” who could “enter into the main arteries of humanistic traditions ... in order ... to counter the entrapping clichés of him as anti humanist ‘post-structuralist’ (he saw what happened to de Man)”.¹¹

It is possible to argue then that Derrida’s style changed simply as his source material shifted. “The laws of reading,” he argued, “are determined by the particular text that is being read” (DC 124). Each reading is a singular engagement, and text needs a different measurement or “method”.¹² We could then argue that Derrida ceased to write in a “playful” manner because the texts/topics he was addressing required a more directed, less open and ambiguous treatment. Which implies that texts on literature and the literary “naturally” require a more literary treatment than texts directly addressing politics, law, hospitality, democracy etc. It seems to betray Derrida’s work to imply that his later texts were less economic and playful because he began to deal with more “serious” topics, topics that would themselves be defrauded by anything other than serious and transparent treatment. It presumes that the reader has only a passive relation to the text, and that the text provokes a direct exegetical representation in line with its codes, genre, approach etc. Derrida leaves little doubt that this is not the case: “[in reading we should not] simply abandon ourselves to the text, or represent and repeat it in a purely passive manner” (DC 124). The analysis of the text must remain faithful to the text, but this faithfulness is absolutely not without potential violence and upheaval. Presuming a simple correlation between text and commentary bestows a sacrosanct or untouchable originality and authenticity on the text, and ignores Derrida’s injunction: “it is important to tamper with what is mistakenly called the ‘form’ and the code, to write otherwise even as one remains very strict as regards philosophical reading-knowledge and competence” (P 85). Perhaps most importantly it depends upon a text that is itself uncontaminated, and which presents a genre and approach that is

¹⁰ Miller, *Derrida* 229.

¹¹ Tom Cohen, “The Geomorphic Fold: Anapocalypitics, Changing Climes and ‘Late’ Deconstruction”, *The Oxford Literary Review* 32.1 (2010) 78.

¹² While “deconstructive questions cannot give rise to methods, that is, to technical procedures that could be repeated from one context to another” (P 200), it is also true that “every discourse, even a poetic or oracular sentence, carries with it a system of rules for producing analogous things and thus an outline of methodology” (P 200). Thus

In what I write, I think there are also some general rules, some procedures that can be transposed by analogy ... but these rules are taken up in a text which is each time a unique element and which does not let itself be turned totally into a method. (P 200)

somehow pure. It is no exaggeration to say that a mode of reading which is blind to the polyphony of subjects and the complicity of styles is barely reading at all. The eye that the text produces is one that sees beyond the surface, and penetrates the multiplicity of potentiality in the text.

It is also possible to argue that Derrida's style changed as the future or legacy of a deconstruction *worthy of the name* became an increasing concern. Derrida says in "As if I were Dead", "if you want to 'do deconstruction' – 'you know, the kind of thing Derrida does' – then you have to perform something new, in your own language, in your own singular situation, with your own signature, to invent the impossible" (AS 217-18). Following Derrida's death Michael Naas writes that we are now at the opening of a new possibility wherein Derrida's work can be read "on its own terms, ... without the spectre ... of Derrida's presence. ... [It] is perhaps now possible as it never really was before to read his work without the phantasm of an author or a father coming to master our reading".¹³ But while the absence of the father may, as Tom Cohen argues,¹⁴ enable deconstruction to shake off the shackles of "Derrida studies", it may also take it in a direction wholly antithetical to Derrida's beliefs. In a 1993 interview with Bernard Steigler Derrida said "I'm not under any illusion about the possibility of my controlling or appropriating what I do, what I say or what I am" (ET 37). "But", he continued,

I do want – this is the point of every struggle, of every drive in this domain – I would at least like the things I say and do not to be immediately and clearly used towards ends I feel I must oppose. I don't want to appropriate my product, but for the same reason, I don't want others doing this towards ends I feel I must fight. (ET 37)

Over the course of a long and often contentious career Derrida's work was subject to an excessive amount of misappropriation, mistranslation and misreading.¹⁵ But while Derrida was all too familiar with the misuse of deconstruction by its vociferous detractors, critics have recently argued that towards the end of his career it was Derrida's *supporters* who became a source of anxiety.¹⁶ Naas's bold

¹³ Naas, *Derrida From Now On* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008) 9. For more on the phrase "worthy of the name" see chapter two and Bennington's "Dignity".

¹⁴ See conclusion.

¹⁵ While examples of misappropriation and misreading are too numerous to mention, an example of mistranslation is the notorious Richard Wolin translation of Derrida's "Heidegger: Philosopher's Hell". For more see "The Work of Intellectuals and the Press" (P 422-54).

¹⁶ As Cohen suggests in "The Geomorphic Fold", it's possible that the de Man and Heidegger affairs played a role in the change in Derrida's style and focus. Seeing the media circus that arose

striding forward to the future of deconstruction may have been precisely what concerned Derrida, and caused his later texts to partake of a certain dogmatism or pedagogic insistence.

Cohen coins the term “*Derridawars*”¹⁷ to refer to the struggles between Derrida and his academic heirs, arguing that in *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy* we do not witness a gesture of connection or homage but see Derrida “tracking ... a renegade off-spring, one who imagines himself to have surpassed deconstruction”.¹⁸ Cohen notes struggles within Derrida’s texts as he reacted to “betrayal” by his academic family, who, in “wanting to be heir and official extension, wanting to build a more or less officious ‘deconstructive’ network”¹⁹ move too soon, too quickly, and “must be yanked back, reinscribed, *exscribed*, cut off and restituted, in a manner bearing on what might come ‘after’ J.D.’s writing”.²⁰ While Martin McQuillan, addressing *On Touching* in an earlier issue of *Derrida Today*, never expressly relates Derrida’s criticism of Nancy to a preservation of his legacy, his outline of Derrida’s analysis supports Cohen’s argument. He proposes that “Derrida turns on Nancy some of the guns that are usually trained on himself by others (the self-deconstructing text, the transcendental reduction, the excessive word play that destroys the category) and lets Nancy have both barrels”.²¹ In other words,

“There is deconstruction and there is deconstruction!” ... There is what Derrida does and there is a use of the term “deconstruction” in an institutional context as an act of affiliation to a certain reading project but the work pursued under this name may or may not be any more “deconstructive”, i.e. Derridean, than work going on outside it.²²

McQuillan’s argument implies a certain insistence by Derrida that deconstruction retain his name, his trace, and his *intentions*. A direct consequence of this is the replacement of deconstruction as a live act of reading with a cult of the master’s text. As Leitch writes, “given the scope and complexity of his corpus, Derrida’s

when details of their sympathy/collaboration with the Nazi party came to light, Derrida – perhaps – began to grow concerned about the future of deconstruction, and the potential treatment of its legacy.

¹⁷ Tom Cohen, “Tactless – the Severed Hand of J.D.”, *Derrida Today* 2.1 (2009) 3.

¹⁸ Cohen, “Tactless” 6.

¹⁹ Cohen, “Tactless” 10.

²⁰ Cohen, “Tactless” 8.

²¹ Martin McQuillan, “Toucher I: The Problem with Self-Touching”, *Derrida Today* 1.2 (2008) 210.

²² McQuillan 206.

scholarly readers, no matter their approach, risk becoming disciples rather than critics, expending copious energy systematising, deciphering, standing by attentively, ventriloquising”.²³

There is no definitive reason, be it fiendishly complex or beautifully simple, for the stylistic and thematic changes that occurred in Derrida’s texts. Woven together are the arbitrary choices and deliberate paths that a life and an academic career take, the swerves of *clinamen* that produce new, unmappable trajectories. However, as Derrida’s career progressed a number of direct statements can be made. First, the amount of engagements to speak at conferences and colloquiums increased. A change in style could therefore be convincingly explained away by arguing that Derrida’s later texts seemed less “written” because they were exactly that: oral deliveries that were later published with few alterations. Thus *The Politics of Friendship* may present a less “literary” style because it stems from a series of seminars given in 1988-89. *Memoires for Paul de Man* comprises the text of a eulogy and subsequent seminars, *Given Time* and *Archive Fever* stem from conferences, and *Rogues* and *Aporias* from the Cerisy-la-Salle lectures. *Dissemination*, on the other hand, *Glas*, *The Post Card*, *The Truth in Painting*, and *On Touching* were all texts written for publication, and take a certain complexity and ornate or “experimental” style from the indulgences offered by the form. However, *Spurs*, *Signsponge*, and *H.C. for Life* were first oral deliveries at Cerisy. “Ulysses Gramophone” was first presented at a conference on Joyce and *Monolingualism* breathed its first words out loud. What this brief selection aims to show is that the undeniable restrictions of oral delivery cannot be wholly charged with the pervasive change to Derrida’s style.

Second, the amount of time Derrida spent reading, explaining and referencing his own texts also increased.²⁴ The conferences and symposiums mentioned above were often dedicated either to Derrida’s texts or to specifically “deconstructive” readings, and so Derrida either explicated themes from previous works, or performed a deconstructive engagement. More and more, however, Derrida tied his texts to previous texts, noting how paths taken in one provide a ghostly side road to another, so that, as Catherine David said in a 1983 interview;

²³ Leitch 230.

²⁴ See Samir Haddad, “Reading Derrida Reading Derrida: Deconstruction as Self-Inheritance”, *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 14.4 (2006) for an exposition of Derrida reading Derrida, and the auto-immunity that involves.

“To read you, one has to have read Derrida” (P 117).²⁵ Readings of Nietzsche and Hegel become, as Eugenio Donato pointed out, a performance of “Derrida rereading *Of Grammatology* today” (EO 55). Texts and themes previously thought apolitical were revealed to have a political dimension – in *Rogues* Derrida states that “The thinking of the political has always been a thinking of *différance* and the thinking of *différance* always a thinking of the political, of the contours and limits of the political” (R 39).²⁶ Under the irony of citation outlined in chapter four, Derrida citing Derrida inaugurated a new text. Derrida reading Derrida changed Derrida.²⁷

Derrida’s texts operate in ironic, aphoristic relation to each other, each a foreword and an epilogue to another, each a reengagement and a rewriting – independent and conjoined. Each text is in counterpoint with every other text, in time and out of time. Each new text changes every other text, always a preface to a further fragment. Hence “Envois” is “the preface to a book I have not [yet?] written” (PC 3), and *The Politics of Friendship* “resembles a length preface. It would rather be the foreword to a book I would one day wish to write” (PF vii). There is, however, absolutely no direct correlation between self-inheritance or self-citation and a more prosaic style; one would in fact presume it to have precisely the opposite effect. But at issue is the fact that as Derrida’s neologisms and paleonyms increased in number and relations, a corresponding tendency to explicate and trace those connections is also visible. The deconstructive interest in undoing and unsealing became not so much an act of engagement but of *disclosure*, of showing how the knots were tied. Not to perform a reading that *gives a chance*, but arguably a reading that operated to *suppress chance*. While Derrida could never be accused of presenting “easy” or instantly accessible papers,

²⁵ Derrida exclaimed in reply: “But that’s true of everyone! Is it so wrong to take account of a past trajectory, of a writing that has in part sealed itself, little by little? But it is also interesting to undo, to unseal” (P 117).

²⁶ A brief overview detailing academics who engaged with the political aspects of Derrida’s work in the 1970s and 1980s, and the more sustained engagement after the 1990s, can be found in the introduction to *Derrida and the Time of the Political*.

²⁷ An excellent example of this is given by Haddad in “Reading Derrida Reading Derrida”. Here he compares a passage from *The Politics of Friendship* with a citation of the same passage in *Rogues*. In *The Politics of Friendship* Derrida writes that, with regards to democracy, the limit between the conditional and the unconditional “will have inscribed a self-deconstructive force in the very motif of democracy” (PF 105). In *Rogues* he adds a clause: “... will have inscribed a self-deconstructive force [*I could have in fact said ‘autoimmune’ force*] in the very motif of democracy” [emphasis added] (R 90). As Haddad writes, although he rather understates the case, “In thus suggesting that we today read ‘self-deconstructive’ as ‘autoimmune’, in *changing names*, Derrida ever so gently brings the earlier analysis into line with the latter” (511).

the content of these pieces was often a *performance* of a deconstructive reading which operated to explicate deconstruction. Derrida, in a sense, demonstrated how Derrida would read the topic in question – Derrida performed Derrida reading.

As oral deliveries and explanations increased, a third factor was exponentially growing, an event that brings oral delivery and explanation together, and is most commonly productive of a direct, reductive style. The interview. This chapter proposes that in response to the *laws of the interview* Derrida's work began to confess and expose itself in a way that can be termed *autoimmune*. Autoimmunity is a parabolic inter-view, a critical look, a self-deconstruction, a view inside that undoes what it sees, Medusa turned on herself. Autoimmunity means that, as Naas writes, the sovereign subject must guard and expose itself, "protecting itself and so compromising itself, compromising itself by protecting itself, expressing and justifying itself by introducing within itself counter-sovereignities that threaten to destroy it".²⁸ Autoimmunity means that the entity turns on itself, and "must then come to resemble [its] enemies, to corrupt itself and threaten itself in order to protect itself against their threats" (R 40). The more Derrida was obliged to rewrite and re-explain his own work – and that of others – in clear, accessible form, the more he had to reduce or constrain modes of expression and approach, restricting his own freedom, predicting and anticipating the lines of certain counter-signatures. We thus first look at the mode of the interview, then turn to the relation between irony and autoimmunity, before finally outlining the ways in which the interview caused deconstruction to turn in on itself in ironic autoimmunity.

The Laws of the Interview

From "Implications", his first interview, to *Learning to Live Finally*, his last, the amount of time Derrida spent in consultation regarding his work increased exponentially.²⁹ Derrida repeatedly expressed exasperation with a mode of

²⁸ Naas, *Derrida* 128.

²⁹ Compiling an exhaustive list of Derrida's interviews is a difficult task. However, from *Points*, *Paper Machine*, *Negotiations*, the numerous volumes that contain interviews, for example *Sovereignities in Question*, *Who Comes After the Subject*, *Applying: To Derrida* etc. the film and screenplay, and online resources at <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/jacques-derrida/bibliography/> and <http://hydra.humanities.uci.edu/derrida/jdentre.html> a sense of the amount of interviews Derrida gave each year can be acquired. There was at least one in 1968, two in 1973, and a steady yearly increase to at least 11 in 1986, 13 in 1990, with a slight slowing down from 1994. Finding the interviews held by academics is easier than acquiring a complete list of those held by journalists,

discussion whose price was “simplification, impoverishment, distortion, displacement of argument by symptom” (P 10), but was obliged to continue to represent, re-elaborate, and reduce his work in explanatory interviews, clarificatory interventions and elucidatory dialogues. While the best of the interviews, academic discussions engaging with the finer points of Derrida’s work, provided subtle and rewarding dialogues,³⁰ too many were premised on the disappointing ““An interview with Derrida? At last maybe we’re going to understand something about him!”” (P 115) Obligated to quickly unravel texts that of their very nature resist summary and “plain” exegesis, the demand for speed and accessibility caused Derrida to make some pained remarks – “The one thing one cannot accept these days ... is an intellectual taking his time, or wasting other people’s time” (N 89). Against the demand for swift simplification – bypasses that simulate direct access – Derrida believed “in the necessity of taking time or, if you prefer, of letting time, of not erasing the folds” (P 116). Against the stipulation for direct engagement Derrida tried “to respect, as much as possible, the indirect conditions or invisible detours of the question” (N 91). The format and constraints of the interview – “I’m going too fast, of course; surely I’m being unjust; the interview genre elicits that; I’d refine this if we had the time and the texts in hand” (N 174) – can often lead to a dangerously reductionist presentation of work. As this chapter argues, it is precisely the law of the interview – a quick entry, a speedy transfer of information, and a fast exit – that imposed itself on Derrida, leading to an autoimmune relation to himself and his texts.

The word *interview* comes from the old French *entrevue*, to have a glimpse of, and *s’entrevoir*, to see each other. *Inter + view*: to see between, to see inside, to enter through a view, to enter with a view. An inter view is many things; a neutral glance, an interested gaze, a sharp look, an accusing stare. It can informally chat, or formally demand defence, justification, and consolidation (P 10). Public and private, formal and informal, the interview seeks an audience, and aspires to make public private or insider knowledge. It asks for explanations and elucidations, demanding more information in a more accessible way, and thereby running the risk of turning more information into less knowledge, transforming

and making precise qualitative judgements about the value of the interviews is extremely difficult. Yet it seems clear that Derrida did give a large number of interviews, and that he found (many of) them quite taxing.

³⁰ See, for example, interviews by Attridge, Norris, Weber, Bennington, Nancy, Kamuf, Ferraris etc.

greater detail into reduced content. Too often the potential for the interview to be a true inter-view is abandoned for the sake of an over-view that takes little regard for the long view. Despite its name, despite its simulation of an open dialogue or movement between focuses, the interview is all too often a place of marked maps and single directions, with roles – she who questions and she who replies – clearly determined.

The interview too often strives – and pretends – to go straight to the centre, straight to the heart of the matter, to uncover, without prevarication, play, or extraneous detail, speaking plainly and directly, exactly what the interviewee's intentions were, and what her meaning is. It presupposes a determinable, translatable, univocal meaning that can be uncovered and presented, simply and immediately. It presumes that the mode of expression is separate from the content, so that an idea presented in an ornate or elaborate style will remain the same when expressed simply and plainly. In this mode of the interview speed is always the key – “the tape does not wait and there is no time to look for the right words” (P 32). It is presumed that speed *is* honesty, that the quick answer is the candid answer as it taps into meaning without the activity of the censor.³¹

The speed of the interview and its simulation of a “greater” truth is even further heightened in a filmed interview that is broadcast live. Here the illusion of the absence of intervention, the lack of anything coming between, is even stronger, as the event is seemingly captured and presented, live and in real time. Against this view of presence and direct presentation is a need to demonstrate, Derrida reminds us, that the interview is “an extremely artificial device” (P 133), “that ‘live’ communication and ‘real time’ are never pure”, and that “they permit neither intuition nor transparency, nor any perception unmarked by interpretation or technical intervention” (N 88). The laws of the interview present content as

³¹ While the slow and careful route may, in a sense, multiply defences against the impromptu, the careful path will always contain improvisation. Defences are always betrayed (P 49-50). In “Choreographies” Derrida asked, “Will I be able to write improvising my responses as I go along? It would be more worthwhile, wouldn't it? Too premeditated an interview would be without interest here” (P 90). In “*As if I were Dead*” Derrida explains that he is improvising because “I wanted to expose myself to the event, to the singular event, of being in front of you, totally disarmed, totally exposed, totally vulnerable” (AS 215). In an unpublished interview presented in *Derrida*, Derrida says, “I believe in improvisation and I fight for improvisation. But always with the belief that it's impossible. And there where there is improvisation I am not able to see myself. I am blind to myself” (DP 93). Improvisation – possible and impossible, as there are always filters and delays – is not something Derrida was opposed to. His stance was never specifically against improvised responses, but against the presumption that improvising is somehow more “true”. Or indeed possible.

absolutely singular, as an untouched event; as the final, or only, word. As definitive: “what makes the rule of such an interview impossible, impracticable, is a law of genre that orders us always *to make as if: as if* everything we are speaking about in a quasi-spontaneous fashion had not been treated elsewhere” (AR 135-36).

The interview presumes that “what is there is there and what is not is not” (P 6). While the interview recognises the inseparability of the thinker and the thought, it attempts in a rudimentary, pseudo-psychoanalytic way – “What was your father’s name?”, “How old were you when you left Algeria?”, “Do you have specific memories of that fear?” (P 120) – to explain the thoughts through the thinker. Thus, under the laws of the interview, deconstruction *is* x. And deconstruction *is* x *because* Jacques Derrida, among other things, ““was-born-in-El Biar-on-the-outskirts-of-Algiers-in-a-petit-bourgeois-family-of-assimilated-Jews”” (P 119-20).

Antoine Spire asks, “Isn’t it necessary to simplify in order to spread knowledge? And when we simplify, are we absolutely and irreducibly led into betrayal? Do you think that all interviews are betrayals, because they can’t enter into the details?” (PM 148). Derrida replies that while simplifications are sometimes necessary to transmit knowledge and to speak in general, there must be rules, or precautions, so that one offers “the best or least bad simplification” (PM 148). In any text some simplification will always occur, as one can never present, in perfect detail, every aspect of each case. But, “perhaps, perhaps, it is better to simplify a little while letting something get through, like contraband, rather than to be silent with the excuse that one can never be equal to the complexity of things” (PM 149). In betrayal arising from simplification, one hopes that a measure of “truth” slips in between the glances. The good interview, with the *least bad* simplification, points the receiver elsewhere, towards the longer, less simplified texts, and does not presume to be an end in itself. Derrida’s slow weaving through a textual web may seem like an attempt to “bog down the interview, to paralyse it” (P 37), but is rather an attempt to step in a different direction, and create a new event. As Derrida says, evoking Heidegger,

What matters is the trajectory, the pathway, the crossing – in a word, the experience. The experience is then the method, not a system of rules or technical norms. ... In an interview, even if one repeats the same thing, the

same “contents” – even so, the situation, the context, the mode of address, the addressees, and the signature are all different every time, and it’s the impromptu of this “situation” that is what the reader or listener is waiting for, I suppose. Otherwise, it is always better to read the books. (PM 137)

The “good” interview must be an event, a different path, an experience. It must be recognised as a plurality of voices, a multiplicity of addresses and addressees. Not a direct presentation of a univocal truth achieved through plain speech, pithy, quotable summaries and touching biographical reminiscences.

Irony and Autoimmunity

In *Spectres of Marx* Derrida writes:

the living ego is auto-immune. To protect its life, to constitute itself as unique living ego ... it must ... take the immune defences apparently meant for the non-ego, the enemy, the opposite, the adversary and direct them at once *for itself and against itself*. (SM 177)

In *Rogues* Derrida describes *autoimmunity* as the “strange illogical logic by which a living being can spontaneously destroy, in an autonomous fashion, the very thing within it that is supposed to protect it against the other, to immunise it against the aggressive intrusion of the other” (R 123). The strange, illogical logic of the “autoimmune contradiction or counterindication” (R 83) is a step “both self-protecting and self-destroying, at once remedy and poison” (AR 124) – the parabolic, contradictory irony that operates within a structure and causes it to undo or attack (part of) itself. Autoimmunity is the “*double bind* of threat and chance, not alternatively or by turns promise and/or threat but threat *in* the promise itself” (R 82). It is a force of weakness, a suicidal drive of threat and chance, promise and perjury, of (ir)responsibility. It is what this thesis has referred to as a force of *irony*.

Autoimmunity is a deferral, a sending off, a *renvoi*, a turn, an interruption, a parabolic stepping away. It is a protection through exposure, an ironic, parabolic step that is not, a step under erasure, a step that steps in a different direction, that undoes what it proposes, that steps into itself. It is the parabolic step that allows the event to be, that steps up to the other: “autoimmunity is not an absolute ill or evil. It enables an exposure to the other, to *what* and to *who* comes – which means that it must remain incalculable. Without autoimmunity, with absolute immunity,

nothing would ever happen or arrive” (R 152). Autoimmunity is the aporia that opens another path, that has, as irony, “an internal contradiction, an indecidability, that is, an internal-external, nondialectisable antinomy that risks paralysing and thus calls for the event of the interruptive decision” (R 35).³²

Derrida sees “a freedom of play, an opening of indetermination and indecidability *in the very concept* of democracy” (R 25) – it is mutable, “lack[ing] of the proper and the self-same” (R 37). Like irony, democracy is elusive and undecidable, always insufficient to meet its own needs and demands, pervertible and perfectible,³³ and better reinscribed, Derrida writes, as the *democracy to come*. *Democracy to come* has the structure of a promise, but a promise in and of irony, a promise/perjury, an aporetic “force *without* force, incalculable singularity *and* calculable equality, commensurability *and* incommensurability, heteronomy *and* autonomy, indivisible sovereignty *and* divisible or shared sovereignty” (R 86). Democracy to come *is* autoimmune, parabolically undoing itself, overstepping itself, transgressing itself. It is a different thinking of the event, an event that is unique and unforeseeable. A *mondalisation*, a thinking beyond national borders, of justice, and of self-criticism.

The contradictions of “democracy to come” include that of the performative/constative hyphenation. The phrase can “correspond to the neutral, constative analysis of a concept” but can also inscribe a performative, operating as a promise, belief, or command. “The *to* of the ‘to come’ wavers between imperative injunction (call or performative) and the patient *perhaps* of messianicity (nonperformative exposure to what comes, to what can always not come or has already come)” (R 91). The two possibilities alternate, haunt each other, parasite each other, parabolically stepping over and into the other, and Derrida directly links this movement to the step of irony. “In saying this myself right now, in cautioning you that I can by turns or simultaneously play on the two

³² Autoimmunity is an effect of irony, that is, its contradictions stem from the ironic contradictions and hyphenations that effect the mark. The undoing that occurs is also one of the effects of irony, but by no means the only result.

³³ In *Rogues* Derrida uses the example of the 1992 Algerian elections, in which democratic elections were halted as the government felt that the electoral process would end – democratically – in the cessation of democracy. Similarly, in response to the September 11th attacks the American government restricted its own freedom and democratic processes, deciding, in order to save democracy and freedom, to temporally suspend (a degree of) democracy and freedom. In so doing it added friendly fire to the loss of life. In protecting itself democracy turns on itself, and “must then come to resemble these enemies, to corrupt itself and threaten itself in order to protect itself against their threats” (R 40). In turning into something other, turning in on itself, autoimmunity designates an anacoluthic step, an ironic movement of self-interruption.

turns or turns of phrase, I withdraw into the secret of irony, be it irony in general or the particular rhetorical figure called irony” (R 91). Irony: the alternation *and* simultaneity of meanings, a parabolic step of hyphenation.

Democracy’s force is an ironic, parabolic force of weakness, and yet,

is it not also democracy that gives the right to irony in the public space? Yes, for democracy opens public space, the publicity of public space, by granting the right to a change of tone (*Wechsel der Töne*), to irony as well as to fiction, the simulacrum, the secret, literature, and so on. And, thus, to a certain nonpublic public within the public, to a *res publica*, a republic where the difference between the public and the nonpublic remains an indecidable limit. There is something of a democratic republic as soon as this right is exercised. ... It ... already opens, for whomever, an experience of freedom, however ambiguous and disquieting, threatened and threatening, it might remain in its “perhaps”, with a necessarily excessive responsibility of which no one may be absolved. (R 91-92)

The ironic, autoimmune, parabolic step of democracy means that democracy is always open to the other, and to an alterity which may attack it. Derrida’s use of the term *nonpublic* is very important here. He does not oppose, as does Rorty, a *public* and a *private*, with irony of the side of the private, but a *public* and a *nonpublic*, a public and that which prevents the notion of the homogenisation of the public. The nonpublic designates an alterity within the public that prevents the public from closing in on itself, from considering itself the proper and forming strict boundaries between itself and the other. The nonpublic is also the nonsubject, and the nonhuman – the book, the building, the animal, the environment. Irony is the acknowledgement of the non-public within the public arena, the right to a secret, without which “we are in a totalitarian space” (TS 59). As Jonathan Culler writes:

It has been proclaimed that 9/11 brought the end of irony. If that were true that would be a worrying indication of the possibility of an end of democracy also, an onset of totalitarianism, as total information awareness would herald the end of the secret. Literature, as the possibility of the secret and of irony, is both indispensable to democracy to come and to the hyperresponsibility to which thinking calls us, especially the thinking of Jacques Derrida.³⁴

³⁴ Jonathan Culler, “The Most Interesting Thing in the World”, *Diacritics* 38.1-2 (2008) 15.

What, however, is the *right to irony*? The right to irony is the right to ambiguity, the right to undecidability, to a certain play, to elliptical approaches, to a mode of engagement that is open, that acknowledges inconsistencies, instabilities and contradictions, that recognises – without suppressing – differences and alterity. It is the right to recognise the mark as divided. It is the right to engage with troubling questions, and to acknowledge the difficulties, interruptions, exclusions and autoimmunity that rights, and laws, entail.³⁵ Not to lose oneself in meaninglessness, in the impossibility of decisions or infinite deferral, but each time and in each situation *to act* knowing that *it's not that simple*. To attempt to address the fact that the unconditional towards which we (should) strive is contaminated by or hyphenated to the conditional, and that responsible steps towards are always also irresponsible steps away.³⁶

Derrida argues that freedom and sovereignty³⁷ always presume upon an empowered self with a certain power to decide, to speak for itself and know

³⁵ And which absolutely steps away from the political associations and implications of Rorty's private ironist – see chapter one.

³⁶ The contradictions and complications of irony can be likened to *doublethink*. As Orwell writes:

[Winston's] mind slid away into the labyrinthine world of doublethink. To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them ... to believe that democracy was impossible and that the Party was the guardian of democracy. (George Orwell, 1984 (New York: New American Library, 1977) 35)

Doublethink is defined in the OED as “The mental capacity to accept as equally valid two entirely contrary opinions or beliefs”, and as such bears a striking similarity to irony. As a negotiation between extremes irony cannot be wholly appropriated by democracy *or* totalitarianism – its freedom can always be used as a control. It does not work specifically to produce apathy or confusion or the horror and trauma that characterises 1984, but nor does it work specifically to introduce democracy, liberalism or responsibility. Hyphenation can join and interrupt in any way; the right to irony is the right to open a door to the other, knowing that the door, the other and the event are undecidable. However, it is precisely the movement of openness and negotiation that renders irony not wholly neutral but a positive opening in and of itself.

³⁷ Wendy Brown criticises Derrida for his recuperation of a “conditional and conditioned sovereignty from its absolutist and unconditional heritage” (“Sovereign Hesitations”, *Derrida and the Time of the Political* 114). She argues that democracy and sovereignty are simply incompatible, as in democracy the people suspend their power, and “a sovereign that suspends its sovereignty is no sovereign” (117). Derrida, argues Brown, mistranslates the *cracy* (rule) of democracy as force or power, and thereby “occludes the most difficult feature of democracy: the regular practice of sharing power, of self-governance. Shared rule, shared power ... is very different from the collective *force* of the people *on* something or *against* something” (124). Not only does Derrida underline the sovereign force of democracy, Brown claims that Derrida's definition of democracy emphasises individual, sovereign freedom in such a way as to make it difficult for each individual to participate in the rule of the demos: the individual is too busy, so to speak, being free. It thereby separates freedom and rule, and means that we are ruled by something external – it requires the state. The “sharp distinction between personal liberty and political rule” (125) places democracy in an impossible position. And so Derrida attempts to redeem it by opening freedom beyond the human and democracy beyond the nation-state. But, as “freedom is detached from concrete

itself.³⁸ But as soon as the sovereign self tries to place itself or explain itself it begins the process of autoimmunity. In defining itself, sovereignty/the self/democracy opens itself up to counter-interpretations that dissolve any conceptualisation of the entity as in possession of an absolute “natural” right or essence. The autoimmune process thus does not simply consist in attacking one’s own defences, a murder/suicide,

but in compromising the self, the *autos* – and this ipseity. It consists not only in committing suicide but in compromising *sui-* or *self-*referentiality, the *self-* or *sui-* of suicide itself. Autoimmunity is more or less suicidal, but, more seriously still, it threatens always to rob suicide itself of its meaning and supposed integrity. (R 45)

Suicide may kill a body, but autoimmune suicide does away with the very concept of a self, annihilating suicide as there is no longer a self present enough to itself to take its own life. Derrida does not propose to eradicate the sovereign subject, but shows that the sovereignty of the subject is a priori divided, parabolically interrupted, a divided sovereignty of the democracy to come.

Derrida parabolically steps between a sovereigntist and antisovereigntist stance, showing that sovereignty and nonsovereignty are hyphenated. As he says in *For What Tomorrow*, “according to the situations, I am an antisovereignist *or* a sovereigntist – and I vindicate the right to be antisovereignist at certain times and a sovereigntist at others” (FW 92). For Derrida, in this context,

responsibility is what dictates the decision to be sometimes *for* the sovereign state and sometimes *against* it, for its deconstruction ... according to the singularity of the contexts and the stakes. There is no relativism in this, no renunciation of the injunction to “think” and to deconstruct the heritage. This aporia is in truth the very condition of decision and responsibility – if there is any. (FW 92)

Despite this openness, however, and against Hägglund, *deconstruction does not neutrally tread*; it “demands a difficult dissociation, almost impossible but

subjects, it is also detached from power and the political” (127). Hence freedom becomes the way in which people are isolated from political power. While Brown’s criticisms are well-argued and persuasive, her criticism of Derrida’s use of the term “force” ignores its complicated status in Derrida’s work. Force, as outlined in chapter two, is always a force of weakness. Force is always an ironic force, and the sovereign force of an individual is thus neither quite as powerful as Brown believes, nor quite as insurmountable an obstacle to democracy.

³⁸ As Derrida points out, too often the self so in command of itself is “master in the masculine: the father, husband, son, or brother, the proprietor, owner or seignior” (R 12).

indispensible, between *unconditionality* (justice without power) and *sovereignty* (right, power, or potency). Deconstruction is on the side of unconditionality, even when it seems impossible, and not sovereignty, even when it seems possible” (FW 92). Deconstruction “is not *neutral*. It *intervenes*” (PO 93).

The Autoimmune Inter-view

Under the laws of the interview, and through the ironic, autoimmune double bind – protecting and endangering, correcting and reducing, making accessible or comprehensible and making lesser – Derrida was obliged to adopt a certain propositional, programmatic relationship to his texts. These “laws” demand that that deconstruction present a *Thinker*, a responsible subject to whom questions can be directed, and from whom explanations and accessible summaries can be gleaned. The nonmethod of deconstruction came closer to a method, and Derrida became, to an extent, the controller of that method. In protecting himself and deconstruction Derrida exposes himself and deconstruction, autoimmunely reading, presenting, attacking the non-method of deconstruction, and pushing it towards a method. The public self-critique and self-defence of deconstruction entails an autoimmune relation with itself, an undoing of deconstruction by conceptualising it, and causing it to resemble its “enemies” (R 40) – *interviews*.

If deconstruction is openness to alterity and to the other, and posits not a subject but a subjectile, under the laws of the interview it autoimmunely posits a subject – a thinker responsible for thoughts – and a certain closure. Thus it is autoimmunely forced to become *immune*. Deconstruction, like democracy, *has to* be autoimmune in order to be itself, but being itself opens it to the undoing of itself. If autoimmunity is “that strange behaviour where a living being, in quasi-*suicidal* fashion, ‘itself’ works to destroy its own protection, to immunise itself *against* its ‘own’ immunity” (AR 94), in the case of deconstruction a parabolic step occurs, an ironic twist that turns autoimmunity on itself. The *(ir)responsibility* that is deconstruction is forced to comply with certain legal and social “responsibilities” – present your work accessibly, systematise and sign your work simply and on the dotted line – and thereby become autoimmunely irresponsible. As Derrida was obliged more and more to expose himself in the form of the interview, and subject himself to the demands for explanation, definition and *précis*, he was forced into an autoimmune relationship with himself,

a relationship that contaminated the style of his later texts. This autoimmunity operates both in terms of the attack on part of the self outlined in “Faith and Knowledge” – Derrida in autoimmune relation to the section of himself that is deconstruction – *and* the attack on the “whole” self in *Rogues* – Derrida/deconstruction in autoimmune relation to Derrida/deconstruction.

As Derrida re-read his texts, and grew increasingly worried about his legacy, the position of Thinker grew, and in protecting deconstruction it began to resemble “Derrida studies”. By bringing deconstruction under his wing it is protected, but exposed to the possibility of dying with him. It becomes not so much that which happens, but that which happens when *Derrida* reads. Protecting deconstruction causes it to attack itself, to close its openness. The inter-view caused a certain jealousy – a certain blindness – and a rather more zealous protection of the legacy.

The autoimmune problems of speaking of deconstruction can be likened to the difficulties of speaking democratically. To speak on democracy “in an intelligible, univocal, *sensible* fashion, would mean making oneself understood by *anyone* who can hear this word or the sentences formed with this word” (R 71). How does one speak democratically of deconstruction? Is it even necessary?³⁹ Deconstruction by no means has to be understood by all, and yet a constant accusation levelled against Derrida was the deliberate obfuscation of ideas, “a written style that defies comprehension” (P 420).⁴⁰ As Derrida continues in *Rogues*,

To speak democratically of democracy, it would be necessary, through some circular performativity and through the political violence of some enforcing rhetoric, some force of law, to impose a meaning on the word *democratic* and thus produce a consensus that one pretends, by fiction, to be established and accepted – or at the very least possible and necessary: on the horizon. (R 73)

Deconstruction, a non-method, has no univocal, dictionary-friendly definition. Like democracy, and like irony, its proper state is a certain impropriety. As such it

³⁹ In “Unsealing (“the old new language”) Derrida says “No one gets angry at a mathematician or a physicist whom he or she doesn’t understand at all” (P 115). “Why is it apparently the philosopher who is expected to be ‘easier’ and not some scientist or other who is even more inaccessible?” (P 116)

⁴⁰ This is taken from the letter penned by Barry Smith et al in protest against Derrida’s honorary degree from Cambridge.

can never be presented in the simple,thetic statements that the law of the interview demands. Hence the public self-critique and self-defence of deconstruction entails an ironic, autoimmune relation with itself, an undoing of deconstruction by conceptualising it.

The interview is the time and the place of explanations, excuses, and confessions. As a performative, a confession produces truth: “Saint Augustine speaks often of ‘making the truth’ in a confession” (P 347). By explaining, representing, reciting and reworking, a new reading, a new understanding, a new truth is born. But once truth can be produced it becomes impossible to distinguish from a lie; a confession is truth/perjury. The confession is furthermore subject to a temporal rift: one can only confess for oneself, but the temporal delay that exists between an act and the confession of the act means that the self that confesses is different to the self that perpetrated. An “anacoluthic substitution of the subject” (WA 189) occurs as the self that confesses confesses at the wrong time and for a self that no longer exists. In the interview/confession Derrida re-read and re-presented his work and therefore changed it, confessed and read as a different person, and produced the truth/perjury of a different text. The impossibility of the confession – it’s always too late to confess – is joined by the autoimmunity of the confession – confessing, too late, undoes the text confessed and changes it. A confession, which exposes to protect, admits wrong to do right, is always an autoimmune process.

In a 1983 interview Anne Berger said to Derrida: “I don’t know if I’m addressing the man or the ‘writer-thinker,’ I don’t know what their relation is” (P 132). Their relation, Derrida has shown us, is one of mutual, dynamic contamination, as the public and the private Derrida merge together. This intermingling operates within the structure of Derrida’s texts, so that Derrida the man, Derrida the thinker, Derrida’s theory and Derrida’s autobiography become conjoined. As Derrida stated repeatedly,

I do not believe in the conceptual value of a rigorous distinction between the private and the public. There can be the singular and the secret, but these resist the “private” as much as they do the “public”. In what I write one should be able to perceive that the boundary between the autobiographical and the political is subject to a certain strain. (N 17-18)

The contamination between categories and the gathering that so fascinated Derrida generates its own autoimmune problems.⁴¹ An autobiographical, confessional text – all texts – requires the bringing together of all the threads that explain, expose, present and re-present the self. It presumes upon the existence of a pre-existent subject which then outlines its own story. But not only does the act of gathering conjoin the threads of the other, it also assembles threads of events that never took place: “Still today there remains in me an obsessive desire to save in uninterrupted inscription, in the form of a memory, what happens – or *fails to happen*” (SI 34). The gathering attempts to present a stable, unified, self-present self, but by gathering truth, truth is produced, events are changed. The self that gathers is wholly different to the selves that are gathered:

There is not a constituted subject that engages itself at a given moment in writing for some reason or another. It is *given* by writing, by the other: *born* as we were bizarrely saying a moment ago, born by being given, delivered, offered, and betrayed all at once. (P 347)

Thus the self, preserved, is a different self, and the autobiography comprises heterography, and thanatography, as the written self is always other and dead. Preserving and gathering becomes suicide, but an autoimmune suicide, as what dies is not the self as such, but the very idea of a whole, self-present, pure self. Furthermore, in the drive to preserve a memory or two the memories themselves are changed, as the mode of preservation changes the memories.

Hägglund proposes that gathering or totalising impulse found in the autobiography is the drive to survive; Derrida’s wish to live on in his work. In “Dialanguages” Derrida speaks of a “memory machine”, in which everything is inscribed without loss or distortion. But, as Hägglund notes, the machine is impossible, as inscription must be susceptible to erasure or change. The temporality that allows the machine to be also renders it impossible, and Derrida’s absolute desire to have such a machine automatically undoes itself, as absolute fulfilment would negate any desire. The desire to keep everything and protect it is also the desire to kill it, as protecting it from everything protects it from life. For Hägglund the double bind of the desire to keep is the double bind of death and

⁴¹ See “This Strange Institution”.

survival. Derrida's "I want to kill myself" (CF 7) is the desire to mourn his own death and thereby survive it. This is the autoimmune desire for survival:

On the one hand, to survive is to keep the memory of a past and thus resist forgetting. On the other hand, to survive is to live on in a future that separates itself from the past and opens it to being forgotten ... No matter how much I try to protect the one I have been, I have to attack my own defences of the past, since the coming of the future opens my life to begin with.⁴²

Importantly, although Hägglund doesn't mention this, Derrida speaks in the same interview of the "dream of an absolute memory", his "sigh[ing] after the keeping of everything" as his "very respiration" (PM 65). Derrida's very breath, his respiration, is autoimmune, parabolically stepping between life and death, a breath that undoes itself, a breath turn – Celan's *Atemwende*.

Thus this chapter proposes that the laws of the interview – speed, simplification, system, intentionality – were, while not the sole contributor, an important factor in the change in style of Derrida's later work. The result was an autoimmune relation, an ironic contradiction that turned deconstruction in on itself, and imbued it with a certain closure and immunity. While autoimmunity may be self-deconstruction (R 90), the self-deconstruction of deconstruction turns the wheel back to metaphysics and immunity.

Autoimmune (Auto)biographies

Under the *irony of the signature* every text is an autobiographical text, a text on the self and a text on the other. The presentation of the self is a writing of the death of the self, a *thanatography*, as "the 'I live' is guaranteed by a nominal contract which falls due only upon the death of the one who says 'I live' in the present" (EO 10-11). That is, as the name is always the name of a dead person and the signature always the mark of the deceased, autobiography is always the work of a dead author, the presentation of the self that autoimmunely kills the self. The writing of a (soon-to-be) dead author is, however, doubly a thanatography in that it recounts "dead" events, events that never took place, that are not and were not. Derrida changes the strong, self-present, undivided *autos* of the autobiography to a thanatography, but also to a *heterography* – a writing of the other. The self

⁴² Hägglund 160.

presents itself to itself, but the self that writes and the self that is written about, or as Derrida unveils in *Memoirs of the Blind*, the self that paints and the self that is painted, are not the same.⁴³ There is a blind spot as one reflects, an invisible trait that cannot be captured as one looks at oneself looking. An *Augenblick*, a blinking of *différance*, “the law of the inter-view” (MB 55) – the blind view. The self-portrait, like the autobiography, inhabits every text, but is never fully present, always a ruin and in ruins.

The contamination of the real and the fictive causes de Man to refer to the autobiography as *prosopopeia*: “The dominant figure of the epitaphic or autobiographical discourse is, as we saw, the *prosopopeia*, the fiction of the voice-from-beyond-the-grave” (AD 927).⁴⁴ The author figures as a spectral presence within her own text, and the autobiographical becomes thanatographical as the self is split between an empirical self and a linguistic self. Language is figural, and always refers, not to the thing itself, but to a linguistic representation of the thing. Language always distances, and fictionalises. De Man concludes:

Death is a displaced name for the linguistic predicament, and the restoration of mortality by autobiography (the *prosopopeia* of the voice and the name) deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores. Autobiography veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause. (AD 930)

Each writing is the writing of a dead self, dead because disfigured through language, dead because the time of that self is past. Autobiography is the writing of the dead, an ironic, autoimmune suicide through presentation in language.

The autoimmune undoing of the self that takes place in the autobiography takes place through what Derrida refers to as transferential figures.

⁴³ And are different again to the self that reads or views.

⁴⁴ In *Circumfession* Derrida details the facial paralysis that he suffers from, what he calls a disfiguration, which

reminds you that you do not inhabit your face because you have too many places, you take place in more places than you should, and transgression itself always violates a place, an uncrossable line, it seizes itself, punishes, paralyzes immediately, topology here both being and not being a figure. (CF 24)

This *disfiguration* calls to the *de-facement* of *prosopopeia*, as the voice from beyond the grave speaks for a multiplicity of selves, as the body of the subject is split between multiple bodies and multiple others, “real” and “fictive” transferential figures. In *Memoires* Derrida relates *prosopopeia* and *parabasis*.

The most private autobiography comes to terms with great transference figures, who are *themselves* and themselves *plus* someone else (for example, Plato, Socrates, and a few others in *The Post Card*, Genet, Hegel, Saint Augustine, and many others in *Glas* and *Circumfession*, and so forth). In order to speak of the most intimate thing, for example one's "own" circumcision, one does better to be aware that an exegesis is in process, that you carry the detour, the contour, and the memory inscribed in the culture of your body, for example. (P 353)

Every text is an anacoluthic or parabolic autobiography/heterography – an ironic, interrupted exegesis of the corpus of the other that is an ironic, interrupted exegesis of the corpus of the self. The story of the self does not recount the life of a single, unified self present to itself, but a self split by alterity, signed, in a moment of allography, by the other. Thus, under the irony of the signature, the overwriting of the self by the other is also an underwriting that ironically both secures and disturbs the self. The truth of life of the self becomes the (perjured) confession of a death given over to the other. In signing itself the self must wait for the countersignature of the other, for the other to read, repeat and step in a different direction. The countersignature of the other comes “to *lead it* [the text] *off* elsewhere, so running the risk of *betraying* it” (SI 69). Thus the (ironic) countersignature of the other, the change from autobiography to heterography, is an autoimmune act: “you have to give yourself over singularly to singularity, but singularity then does have to share itself out and so compromise itself, *promise to compromise itself*” (SI 69). Promise is a co-promising which is both a compromise *and* compromising. Each text, and each autobiography, is *ironic and autoimmune*, an auto-interpretation or self-critique that both turns every text into a writing of the self, and in that process undoes the self. The irony of the signature is a paraph of the autoimmune, the ironic signing that erases itself as it signs. It signs the ironic contamination of the self and the other, as each text is undersigned by the self, a signature that is already a signing of alterity.

An (ir)responsible, ironic autobiography is one which does not promise the representation of a self-present subject, but, is one which, as Joseph G. Kronick writes, is “a kind of shattering of the mirror in order to face the other to whom [the author] is responsible”.⁴⁵ For Kronick “‘Autobiography’ is the name Derrida gives for this response or pledge to what remains outside [ontology and

⁴⁵ Joseph G. Kronick, “Philosophy as Autobiography: The Confessions of Jacques Derrida”, *MLN* 115 (2000) 999.

totalisation], an other that makes deconstruction, and other bodies of writing, possible”.⁴⁶ A Derridean autobiography does not totalise, does not repeat or represent a life present to itself, but engages the other and self as other through parabolic interruption, an ironic exegesis of the hyphenation of the self and other. What, then, is a biography after Derrida, an inter-view through Derrida, and how do we address, as Naas puts it, “the extraordinary intersection of life and work that goes by the name of ‘Jacques Derrida’”?⁴⁷

In an essay entitled “A Life in Philosophy” Bennington describes a biography as “committed to *making sense* of the life of its subject, of gathering the dispersed events of that life around an organising principle or guiding thread”.⁴⁸ A philosopher is one who lives philosophically, and as such *philosopher* is an ontological category, a mode of being rather than occupation. But what truly gives a thinker the status of philosopher is not simply her work, but the way she lives her life, that is, anecdotal, banal details of everyday existence. Thus “philosophy cannot do without the ontological supplement documented in biography – and therefore cannot do without potential triviality”.⁴⁹ The truths that philosophers present should be absolutely unconnected to their personal lives, and yet it is those personal lives that formed the people who discovered those systems and truths. Anecdotes about the way in which Kant or Spinoza or Wittgenstein lived prove their status as philosophers, and yet undermine philosophy with their triviality. However, in the case of Derrida, Bennington argues Derrida’s work does not seek to end philosophy, and that he is therefore not a philosopher. As such a biography of Derrida would probably not conform to the typical model of a philosophy’s biography, but would take the form of “a multiple, layered but non hierarchised, *fractal* biography which would escape the totalising and teleological commitments which inhabit the genre from the start”.⁵⁰

Two recent biographies of Derrida’s life – Jason Powell’s *Jacques Derrida: A Biography* and David Mikics’ *Who Was Jacques Derrida? An Intellectual Biography* – occupy the troubled border between work and life that Derrida speaks of in “Otobiographies”. However, both absolutely fail to present the

⁴⁶ Kronick 999.

⁴⁷ Naas, *Derrida* 213.

⁴⁸ Geoffrey Bennington, “A Life in Philosophy”, *Other Analyses: Reading Philosophy* (Geoffrey Bennington, 2004) 405.

⁴⁹ Bennington, “Life” 413-14.

⁵⁰ Bennington, “Life” 423.

paratactic, fragmentary, ironic biography which Bennington describes, bearing closer resemblance to *psychobiographies* which “claim that, by following empirical procedures of the psychologistic – at times even psychoanalytic – historicist, or sociologistic type, one can give an account of the genesis of the philosophical system” (EO 5). Both attempt make sense of the *Thought*, to the extent that what Powell terms a biography is in fact a *bibliography*, a listing, with précis and commentary, of his texts. Derrida’s life is what he published, what he thought and how he engaged. Personal details are mentioned only insofar as they appear in texts like *Circumfession* or as they directly affected the content or theme of his works. As Powell writes, “The biography only comes from the texts, if the biography is to make sense of Derrida, as a writer”.⁵¹ While Powell acknowledges the contamination of author and work and life – “Autobiography cannot be written fully; it is just everywhere in life and texts, but nowhere in particular”⁵² – he is interested only in Derrida the writer. For him Derrida *is* deconstruction, and as such Derrida’s biography is a bibliography of texts that reads not as a personal/public history, but a chronologically organised summary or introductory guide.

David Mikics’ text is a biography that sees the subject – Derrida and deconstruction – as immediately knowable and presentable: “I aim to explain his career”.⁵³ Meaning for Mikics is attainable and univocal, and he is oddly and confusingly confident that “Derrida’s resistance to thinking about the personal life cannot prevent biography ... from coming back to haunt him”.⁵⁴ While he purportedly attempts to offer a measured assessment of Derrida’s texts and political/public engagements, his reading of Derrida and of deconstruction is predominantly reductionist and generalising. His statements betray a tendency towards hasty (mis)reading and labelling, making sweeping proclamations such as: “Derrida’s knowing scepticism relieves us of responsibility for our words and deeds: he reduces us to mere parts of the signifying machine”.⁵⁵ While both Powell and Mikics address Derrida through transferential figures – Derrida is understood through his engagement with Hegel, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Levinas,

⁵¹ Jason Powell, *Jacques Derrida: A Biography* (London: Continuum, 2006) 93.

⁵² Powell 141.

⁵³ David Mikics, *Who Was Jacques Derrida? An Intellectual Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 1.

⁵⁴ Mikics xiv.

⁵⁵ Mikics 10.

Sartre etc. – Derrida's signature is wholly subsumed into the system. There is no human being, just a series of events and texts that led *inexorably* to deconstruction, and through which deconstruction can be systematised and comprehended.

Catherine Malabou's collaboration with Derrida in *Counterpath: Traveling with Jacques Derrida* is a *travelogue*, a traversing of Derrida's life and texts, and as such is arguably a far more successful biography than Powell's or Mikics'. *Counterpath* presents disordered chapters/fragments wherein Derrida's mother, his language and his facial paralysis are themes on an equal footing with arche-writing, violence, or messianicity. Punctuating Malabou's investigations into the events of Derrida's life, academic or personal, are postcards sent by Derrida to Malabou as he travels and reads drafts of her book. Malabou's text "travels with" Derrida, it steps with him through different cities, texts and events, mixing biographical detail with critical exposition. It is named a biography *only* in the Library of Congress cataloguing data, and is therefore properly and improperly a biographical work, recognising and not recognising itself as such. Its fragmentary approach, its non-totalising *destinerrance*, its unnamed irony, its maps and itineraries that point in different, impossible and unprogrammable directions, its mixture of the public and the private, and its stepping up, without differentiating, to Derrida's Thoughts and thoughts, makes it a biography *of and after* Derrida. A biography signed over and over again with the inter-view of autoimmune irony, parabolically and undecidably stepping between work on and of the other, and work on and of the self.

The film *Derrida* is successful in a similar way. As the co-director Amy Ziering Kofman explains, "It was never of interest to me to make a film about 'who Jacques Derrida is' and present a narrative of his life".⁵⁶ *Derrida* attempts to side-step the laws of the interview, to step away from univocal meaning, from "a conventional PBS or BBC type documentary narrative that biographically recount[s] facts about Derrida's life in a standard documentary fashion".⁵⁷ Instead, Ziering Kofman and Kirby Dick create a work that is both public and private, academic and anecdotal. A biography on Derrida, inheriting from Derrida an approach to Derrida and to biography. *Derrida* moves slowly, containing meandering shots accompanied by Ziering Kofman's otherworldly quotations from Derrida's texts. It questions representation, and problematises the subject

⁵⁶ Amy Ziering Kofman, "Interview with Filmmakers", Derrida: *Screenplay* 129.

⁵⁷ Amy Ziering Kofman, "Making *Derrida: An Impression, Or...*", Derrida: *Screenplay* 23.

and the means of the biography, knowing that, as Dick says, the work cannot present Jacques Derrida, at home, unplugged, but “creates a doppelganger of the subject”.⁵⁸ Instead it presents a fragmented, fractal subject(ile), a lower case “i”. This “i” is mirrored in the title of the volume of the screenplay: *Derrida* is written in large, while letters, with the exception of the “i”, which is in gold. The subject, always in lower case, is defused, off-centre, a subjectile, and yet always a focus, a draw, a distraction.⁵⁹ It glitters, it is and is not gold. It is biography, and it is not.⁶⁰ It is a work under the irony of the signature.

The biography that Bennington calls for, and that Malabou steps very close to, is a biography written like *Circumfession*; through a fragmented, non-hierarchised form. The presentation of a life through fragments presents frozen moments of self, close-ups of a subject microscopically focused on cells of thought (fragments of skin) to the extent that the cells are no more than anonymous cells, cells unique and yet unrecognisable. The self is seen to be made up of “general” fragments, a subject comprising multiple parts shared by many. *Circumfession* is not “fiction”, nor “autobiography”, but an “interrupted autobiothanatoheterographical opus” (CF 40) whose ideal form of expression is the ironic, parabolic, paratactic fragment. It is a performance of the irony of the signature, a writing of the self, of the other, life and death. In the eponymously titled film Derrida speaks on the difficulty of presenting (autobiographical) stories: “Even when I confide things that are very secret, I don’t confide them in mode of a story. At times, I provide certain signs, facts, dates, but otherwise, I don’t write a narrative”.⁶¹ *Circumfession* is a string of independent units, a radical, unsystematic performance of Schlegel’s description of the memoir as a “system of fragments”. It is an ironic, parabolic (non)story. It is an interview and inter-view; it is the response to systematic, methodical demands and a vast overstepping of those demands. It is a performance of ironic engagement, of nonmethodical, nonthetic, ironic exposition. It is an anacoluthon, always ironically interrupted by the irony of the signature, always stepping over itself and signing in a different direction, promising and compromising.

⁵⁸ Kirby Dick, “Resting on the Edge of an Impossible Confidence”, Derrida: *Screenplay* 47.

⁵⁹ See below for references to the lower case “i” in *Circumfession*.

⁶⁰ For more on the film see Nicholas Royle’s essay “Blind Cinema” in Derrida: *Screenplay*.

⁶¹ Jacques Derrida “*Derrida: Screenplay*”, Derrida: *Screenplay* 77.

Circumfession: A Parabolic AutoBioThanatoHeteroGraphical Opus

Circumfession is a book within a book. Neither chapter, essay, *récit* or section, it is a book which, with another book – *Derridabase* – comprises (the book entitled) *Jacques Derrida*.⁶² Together these separate and conjoined books form a book which is complete and incomplete, as the book – *Derridabase* – which describes “the general system” (JD 1) of Derrida’s thought is parabolically undermined and undercut by the book – *Circumfession* – which, running along the bottom third of the page, demonstrates and performs the impossibility of describing and therefore closing Derrida’s system. *Derridabase* consists of Derrida as read by Bennington, who attempted to systematically detail and delimit the logical categories of Derrida’s thought without quotation or biographical detail. The systemisation of deconstruction will, however, make it predictable, and therefore rob it of a future, and so Derrida responded to Bennington’s death sentence with *Circumfession*, a text which revealed this systematisation or programmability to be doomed to failure. Derrida destabilises his *Thought* with his *thoughts*, with fragments of his life, a proliferation of signatures, phrases masquerading as transcendental signifiers, ambiguously directed apostrophes, doubles and doubled discourses. Responding to Bennington’s (and, through him, all other previous and future) attempts to systematise him, Derrida goes to war against this self/other, and presents, not a thetic undoing, not a propositional engagement, not a descriptive analysis of inaccuracies or exclusions, but a confessional work of exceptional singularity. For Kronick this unpredictability is the essence of an autobiography: “Autobiography, for Derrida, is the compulsion to respond to an other, dead or alive, who provokes in him something singular, a text of his own whose otherness surprised him because it cannot be foreseen from the texts it repeats but does not leave unchanged”.⁶³

In *Circumfession* Derrida presents a deconstructive text at its most unmethodical, where the subject is Derrida: Derrida through Bennington, Derrida through all his interviews, Derrida through his texts, Derrida through Derrida. In

⁶² The trinity of books – *Jacques Derrida*, *Derridabase* and *Circumfession* – problematise referencing, as two books occupy each page. Following the mode of citation that *Jacques Derrida* employs when citing itself, *Derridabase* is cited using page numbers, while quotations from *Circumfession* are given the number of the fragment from which they are taken. Scattered throughout the book(s) are illustrations and photographs that take a single page; these and the frame texts are deemed to be part of the “frame book”, and cited using JD and the page number.

⁶³ Kronick 1001.

the inverted inter-view – alternate-view – of *Derridabase/Circumfession* questions are asked through Bennington’s formulated system. Derrida does not respond with further reductions or explanations, but with a performance of deconstruction that excessively overrides the constative form of *Derridabase*’s implicit questioning. Derrida does not offer accessible answers, but writes against the containment of his work, producing a cutting that opens his texts to aporias, alterity and the impossible. *Circumfession* is a parabolic, paratactic autobiography, ironically stepping between life and death, the self and the other, the proper and the improper. It writes itself and erases itself, presents itself in autoimmunity. It is a confession cut short, a confession of and for alterity and the other, an (ir)responsible confession of produced truth, transferential figures, perjury and guilt.

Writing – criticism – attempts to find a vein, a passageway to the centre, a vena cava as via cava. Bennington writes (on) Derrida in order to find a point of entry, a place that he can see and inhabit and thereby possess. But while *Derridabase* endeavours to go straight to the heart of the matter, *Circumfession* circumnavigates the circulatory system, exploring the web of connections and wandering on the periphery, taking the pulse of a “paragraph which never circumpletes itself” (CF 2). The term “circumfession” is itself a “word vein” (CF 3), a linguistic point or place of passage that branches out in a web/maze of connections, that “makes come the chance of events on which no program, no logical or textual machine will ever close” (CF 3). It is a word from a circulatory system that moves towards a centre which is not the centre, and is therefore a circulatory *asystem*. *Circumfession* is the foreword/foreskin to *Derridabase*, appropriately written after the body of the text, which figures as a trace throughout *Derridabase* and shows it to be incomplete. It is a supplement, adding to a whole and revealing that whole to be *a priori* lacking.

The Fragments of Autobiography

Circumfession presents a “series of 59 widows or counterexamplaries of myself” (CF 48), “59 conjurations” (CF 51), “59 prayer bands” (CF 49), “59 ... periphrases” (JD title page), “59 periods, 59 respirations, 59 commotions, 59 four-stroke compulsions” (CF 25). The 59 fragments – one for each year of Derrida’s life – present Derrida’s circumnavigation through – a deliberately impossible

route – his “interrupted autobiothanatoheterographical opus” (CF 40). In *Circumfession* we find “counterexemplarities” of Derrida, different windows into Derrida’s life at different times, moments that died in the inspiration/respiration of occurring and leave behind widows to remember them.⁶⁴ Each example is set against example, each fragment against fragment, each fragment against *Derridabase*: “I gather my spirits, for there are more than one of them sharing by [sic] body, only by multiplying in me the counterexamples and the countertruths that I am” (CF 48). The 59 different counterexamples of Derrida and of deconstruction present each time a fragment of deconstruction, a performance and an example, that will of necessity be ordered by the reader into a system, but a system that repeats and contradicts itself, and as such will always explode in overdetermination.

While there is a certain linearity to *Circumfession*, albeit one repeatedly disrupted by movements into the past, this linearity is not progressive, as each fragmentary period operates as a full stop, complete and yet in an elliptical series: “this story doesn’t look like anything, nothing has shifted since the first morning on the threshold of the garden” (CF 26). Fragment 5 does not logically follow on from fragment 4, and while the event of reading is naturally changed by the order in which the fragments are read, there is no logical sequentiality that would be disrupted were they reordered at random. A fragment is a single period (of ellipsis), an instant of production that produces and presents the author as she is and was at a specific and singular moment. Derrida emphasizes this by giving – most of – his 59 fragments a single full stop; each fragment comprises a single run-on sentence, clause after clause that ends, if it ends at all, only at the end of each fragment. Each fragment presents the immediacy of a single thought thrown out with the urgency of a single breath – 59 fragments as 59 ironic, autoimmune respirations, aspirations to keep and thereby undo, to present and therefore erase, to be the self and hence the other.⁶⁵ As Derrida explains in “The Word Processor”, the end of each fragment/sentence was dictated by a computer programme, and so Derrida was obliged to stop writing when the programme decided that the

⁶⁴ In “Envois” Derrida describes Socrates as Plato’s widow: “He is *also*, on his part, Plato’s widow. Don’t laugh, there are only widows” (E 172). The one who dies before is ironically, and aphoristically, also the one left behind. In the inter-view, in the window into the self the self is always a widow, looking through the window of memory to what went before, and what will outlast.

⁶⁵ As noted earlier, Derrida describes the autoimmune desire to keep everything as his “very respiration” (PM 65).

fragment would be too long (PM 22). Hence the end of each fragment was unknown to Derrida, evoking the end that could come at any time.⁶⁶ As the author in “Envois” is “afraid to die before finishing my sentence” (E 48), Derrida’s fears that he might die before the end of a long sentence, and that his mother might die before he confessed for her, are repeated throughout the fragments.

Fragments 7 and 18 end with a question mark that functions both as the mark of a rhetorical question which turns the fragment back in on itself, and as a mark that solicits an answer, that opens the fragment up to a dialogic structure. Fragment 34 ends with a dash and fragment 35 with ellipsis: the breath of the fragment runs out, and without the finality of the full stop the fragment continues indefinitely. Fragments 45, 54 and 55 end with an ellipsis of a slightly different sort, as the ellipsis figures within quotation marks. The fragments end in unfinished quotation; they end in a different voice that is cut short, signifying an excessive absence. The author hides behind – and is no more than – the voice of the other and yet this mask is insufficient to complete or represent the instant of the fragment, an instant split by multiple yet incomplete and absent voices. Too many people breathe together, and the fragment runs dry, yet so as to extend the fragment beyond itself and the “closure” of a full stop.

The fragmentary mode that Derrida employs in *Circumfession* emphasises a mode of writing/thinking that conjoins exposition and the theory of that exposition. In fragment 12 he details his anger with Proust’s comment, which reads “‘A work in which there are theories is like an object on which one has left the price tag’” (CF 12). Derrida sees this “decorum” as “vulgar” and “naïve”, stating that “I write with the price on” (CF 12), a (bar) code that is not perhaps visible to every reader, but which can be seen when one pays a price. Work and theory on the work, Derrida’s writing has always retained a performative, fragmentary stepping in to itself.

Fragments are traditionally the work of an instant, a flash of inspiration poured out on to the page. In *Circumfession* the instants of the fragments, each a single period, are instants that span a year, long single sentences that cover a 12 month breath/breadth. The instant expands beyond itself, taking in other instants, and through influences, doublings and quotations, the instants of the other(s). The fragmentary structure of the divided instant is the structure of the testimonial or

⁶⁶ The average was, as Derrida explains, about 25 lines, so there was a certain predictability, but in a sense the knowledge of the approximate end makes the specific end even more abrupt.

confessional moment. A testimony – “always autobiographical” (DE 42) – is of the instant, outlining what was witnessed in a unique and particular moment by a unique and particular witness. However, testimony should recount a general event that any witness could recount, and the “facts” of the event should remain the same at each retelling, at each and every moment. Hence the singularity of the instant is divided by the necessity that it operate as a potentially universal experience – anyone there would have seen the same thing – and by the necessity that its “facts” remain constant. Testimony is always autoimmune, always attacking itself, its conditions of possibility also its conditions of impossibility.

In the instant of the testimony, in the instant of autobiographical witnessing, a truth is produced which fragments the instant. Testimonies and confessions are both constative and performative, splitting the instant of attestation between a truth described and produced. In this fragmentary time the instant is divided and doubled, producing truths that from the moment of their inception have always been true and that render previous truths original perjuries. The presence and present that the confession and testimony requires is impossible, as the self describing the events is other to the self who witnessed them. The instant becomes laden and overdetermined with repetitions, doublings, counter-signatures and counter-possibilities, with the death of the instant and of the subject. Thus the instant of the production of a truth is the instant of the destruction of another truth, fragmenting time and making writing the writing of autoimmune suicide and death. As Derrida writes in *Demeure*, it is here “that the possibility of fiction *and* lie, simulacrum *and* literature, that of the right to literature insinuates itself, at the very origin of truthful testimony, autobiography in good faith, sincere confession, as their essential compossibility” (DE 42).

Autoimmune Thanatography

In *Learning to Live Finally* Derrida describes the autoimmune, ironic contradictions that were his own conditions of possibility – life – and impossibility – death:

I am at war with myself, it's true, you couldn't possibly know to what extent, beyond what you can guess, and I say contradictory things that are, we might say, in real tension; they are what construct me, make me live, and will make me die. (LL 47)

These contradictions stem from the moment he was inscribed into language – named – and into a specific religious, familial, cultural sphere – circumcised. Through irony the act of cutting made him whole, the act of exposure made him more modest: “*the circumcised Jew: more naked, perhaps, and therefore more modest, under the excess of clothes, cleaner, dirtier, where the foreskin no longer covers, protects itself the better for being more exposed, through interiority, pseudonym, irony, hypocrisy, detour and derelay*” (CF 26). Circumcision in the Jewish faith takes place traditionally on the eighth day of a boy’s life, an act that will remain outside the child’s memory. In removing the foreskin circumcision marks the boy, signifying the Jewish faith. For Derrida the foreskin becomes the dot on the “i” that reveals the strong, capitalised subject – “I” – to always be in the lower case. The act of dotting the “i” should create a sovereign *autos*, but instead creates/reveals a weak, injured subjectile:

‘all the dots on the i’s, ... that’s really what I was talking about, the point detached and retained at the same time, false, not false but simulated castration which does not lose what it plays to lose and transforms it into a pronounceable letter, i and not I. (CF 14)

The ironic paradoxes of circumcision – detachment and retention – are “autoimmune ambivalences and antinomies” (R 72) that in seeking to empower weaken, in seeking to mark and place open the self to iterability and homelessness.

Circumcision itself symbolises life and death – the act of cutting causes the boy to be born into the Jewish faith, but the blade against the skin, the removal of part of the body denotes death – a little death, an anacoluthic *petite mort*.⁶⁷ A “circumfession”, as autobiography, written, as Blanchot writes,

in order either to confess or to engage in self-analysis, or in order to expose oneself, like a work of art, to the gaze of all, is perhaps to seek to survive, but through a perpetual suicide – a death which is total inasmuch as fragmentary. (ED 64)

To write is to cease to be, to no longer situate death in the future but in each instant, making each fragment a suicide. An autobiography is the death of the self in a fragmentary instant, the killing of the self to produce a new (multiple) self.

⁶⁷ Eros and Thanatos, ejaculation and severance. Circumcision is also (tropic) interruption: “the tropic of circumcision disposes cuts, caesuras, ciphered alliances, and wounded rings throughout the text” (SQ 54).

When Derrida offers the phrase “I want to kill myself” – read above through Hägglund and the autoimmune – as a phrase incessantly returned to throughout his life and work, he describes the fragmentary relations of the instant, and of the life/death of the fragment and writing of the self. “I want to kill myself”, he writes, “speaks less the desire to put an end to my life than a sort of compulsion to overtake each second, like one car overtaking another, doubling it rather, overprinting it with the negative of a photograph already taken with a ‘delay’ mechanism” (CF 7). The compulsion to die is also a compulsion to live, to follow each dead breath with a new breath, each dead instant with a new instant that explodes in its iterable, fragmented divisibility, prefiguring every other (dead) instant. Hence “I posthume as I breathe” (CF 5); each fragment is a single breath taken from the grave, an impossible instant of life *and* death.

Derrida doubly fears his mother’s death – she who is already parabolically “surviving between life and death” (MB 39) – fearing that she will die and he will be left to mourn her, *and* fearing that he will die and she will not mourn him, as she cannot remember him. This double bind of survival is found in the ironic hyphenation of death and survival found in the fragment. Each fragment dies before each fragment, while also outlasting each fragment, and thereby provides both alleviation and aggravation to the fear(s) of continuance and cessation. By inscribing his and his mother’s deaths into fragments both can survive each other, but both must also die first. *Hence the autoimmune in the fragment.* The promise of death and survival is doubled, as throughout “Aphorism Countertime” Derrida links the fragment to the pledge, the vow, the production of perjury and lie, the production of a double (un)bind.

The death that Derrida resists in *Circumfession* is not only the death of his mother, or the death that writing produces, but the death of himself in the face of the predictable and totalising system that Bennington creates. Unless Derrida can surprise Bennington and undermine the programming, he is without any future. G., as writer of the “absolute theologic program” (CF 28) and holder of absolute knowledge (*savoir absolu* (S.A.)) must be confessed to, not in order to *present* knowledge, but to *produce* it. Derrida confesses, and thus changes his life, produces a different truth, bears witness to what did not occur, recounts memories of “fictive” events. *Circumfession* writes to exist, writes to produce an unpredictable text and self, and so live, and yet is caught by the double bind of

writing – writing is always of death. As Blanchot writes, “to write is to accept that one has to die without making death present and without making oneself present to it” (ED 66). The autobiography, always caught by the irony of autoimmunity, is doubly caught in this instance.

Autobiographical Doublings

The totality of the fragmentary *Circumfession* is broken by excessive quotation, quotation from wholly other times and other people. The quotations from Saint Augustine – primarily his *Confessions* – are within and without the fragment, as they are quoted in Latin within the fragment but also translated – in full – on the edge. The impossibility of closure is heightened by the fact that the Latin quotation within the fragment is often just a few phrases from a passage, while the entirety of the passage is quoted on the border. The fragment is thus forced to contain more than it does contain, and the parabolic stepping into other works and fragments is emphasised. The reader who requires the translations of the Latin is forced each time to move in and out of the fragment, reading from the outside and reinserting the border of the text into the centre. Like an *escarre* (scab or bedsore) the Latin pushes itself outside, while the reader is obliged to invert the process and read through invagination. The quotations from Derrida’s notebooks also figure as counterpoint or syncopated time, pushing the fragments into different time signatures. The supposedly self-present immediacy of the fragment is undone by the voices and times of multiple others, and thus each fragment is of the moment and of a wholly other moment, absolutely of a singular identity and absolutely of others.

The proliferation of quotations marks, of other breaths in a single breath, repeated and refigured throughout the fragments calls to the irony of quotation. In quoting Augustine Derrida is ironically quoting himself, through the irony of quotation quoting a new use of an existing syntax, while also quoting Augustine. The trace of Augustine remains, multiplying the meanings of the passage as authorship becomes shared between Augustine and Derrida, and by the almost inaudible voices of those who used the phrase and words before. In requoting the

quotations⁶⁸ the authorial signature becomes even more confused: Derrida quotes himself – for the “first” time – while also quoting himself and the previous fragment, while also quoting Augustine, while also quoting transgression and iterability. Quotation, even self-quotation, is never passive repetition, but a violent alteration:

Above all do not believe that I am quoting any more than G., no, I am tearing off my skin, like I always do, I unmask and de-skin myself while savagely reading others like an angel, I dig down in myself to the blood, but in them, so as not to scare you, so as to indebt you toward them, not me. (CF 45)

The shifts and changes within each fragment and within the relations between the fragments perform the anacoluthic functioning of parabolic irony. *Circumfession* abounds with changes of syntax, with clauses that leap from the run-on sentences as conceptual and grammatical wholes; the biblical overtones of “this is my corpus” (CF 5), for example, or the definitive statement ““*Circumcision, that’s all I’ve ever talked about*”” (CF 14). The flowing rhythm of the sentences is sometimes cut by excessive punctuation that turns towards parataxis: ““*I am, like, he who, returning, from a long voyage, out of everything*”” (CF 33), or welded together: “sucked up thrown out to the periphery of a sentence” (CF 42). When de Man writes on irony and parabasis in Schlegel he notes how a single passage has both a philosophical content and a sexual content; each phrase differs and defers between the manifest “academic” discussion and the latent sexualised discourse. In *Circumfession* Derrida inverts this order so that the “serious” philosophical system becomes the latent meaning, while the sexualised exposition – “[I am] ‘*the only philosopher to my knowledge who, accepted – more or less – into the academic institution ... will have dared describe his penis*’” (CF 22) – is manifest. The religious act of circumcision, becomes (further) sexualised when Derrida mixes it with fellatio: ““*autofellocircumcision*”” (CF 31). The layout of each page plays both with the concept of the dream-work, and with parabolic irony: Bennington’s philosophical work on the top two-thirds of the page represents manifest content, while Derrida’s fragments on the bottom third represent the traditionally repressed, sexualised content. The movement from

⁶⁸ Certain quotations from Saint Augustine are repeated throughout the fragments; for example, the passage from Augustine detailing how after his mother’s death he wept for a little over an hour is repeated in fragments 9 and 49.

Derridabase to *Circumfession* presents a parabolic, anacoluthic surprise, as Derrida intended, a surprise which is figured and refigured throughout *Circumfession*.

The anacoluthon of parabolic irony, the surprise which Derrida needed to generate, is the shock generated by the contamination of supposedly separate genres. The parabolic step between genres is found within the term itself in German: *Gattung* is both genre and gender/sex, and thus the “scientific” term for divisions contains a priori an illicit reference to sexual acts. The philosophical and the literary, the impersonal philosophical and the personal sexual, the general philosophical and the particular, idiomatic, autobiographical are supposedly separate, as represented by the divided page, but the clear mixing of genres within *Circumfession* embodies the covert contamination that occurs between *Derridabase* and *Circumfession*. And “Why”, asks Derrida elsewhere, “would it be illegitimate, forbidden ... to cross several ‘genres’, to write about sexuality at the same time as one writes about absolute knowledge?” (P 86) Why repress irony and the anacoluthon?

This should absolutely not imply that the sexualised content becomes a form of primary meaning, or that that latent content is somehow more “true”. It becomes impossible to distinguish fact from fiction in *Circumfession*; for Derrida an autobiography always contains “everything + n” (SI 35), the events of what did and did not happen. Hence in fragment 47 Derrida speaks of seeing blood on the back of a little girl following anal penetration, and follows it with a quotation from Augustine, which is translated as “Do I lie? Do I bring confusion by not distinguishing the clear knowledge of these things in the firmament of heaven from the bodily works?” (CF 47) Augustine’s quotation itself contains a parabolic step between genres – “bodily works” – and Derrida’s position becomes even harder to situate when he follows the quotation with “that means, follow carefully, that you never write like SA” (CF 47).

Contradictions figure throughout *Circumfession*, but contradictions that are never wholly realised as such, as they figure in fragments which are too isolated to be wholly in opposition. In *Circumfession* Derrida’s mother is thus both the woman who never cried – “the one who literally could not weep for him” (CF 10) – and who cried each time he left – “she who wept as much as Monica at each of my departures, from the first” (CF 34). Derrida is both “drunk with

uninterrupted enjoyment”, knowing no one “who has been happier than I, and luckier, euphoric”, and yet is also “the *counterexample* of myself ... constantly sad, deprived, destitute, disappointed, impatient, jealous, desperate, negative and neurotic” [emphasis added] (CF 50). *Circumfession* is a collection of fragmentary memories and false names that create a multiple self with multiple histories that exist not in opposition but in syncopation, in spaces that are parallel and contaminated. Contradictions are not contradictions but different events that occurred to different versions of the self. Thus, G. is the name of the father (Geoffrey Bennington) who inherits from the son and the name of mother (Georgette Derrida) who no longer recognises her son: “it’s as if for you I had changed my name without her knowing and my presence then finally becomes the absence it always was” (CF 35). Derrida’s secret name, is Elie – Elijah – the name of circumcision, as Elijah is present/absent at every circumcision. A name that is there and not there, the name of one who is there and not there.⁶⁹ This important secret name – “a whole other story, the one that *Circumfession* more or less turns around” (P 344) – is, however, one whose authenticity Derrida himself questions: “I don’t know if it’s true or if I reinvented it little by little, if I made it up, if I told myself a story in this regard, and in fact rather late, only in the last ten or fifteen years” (P 344).⁷⁰ Memories change, names change, selves change. *Circumfession* is thus “*Everybody’s Autobiography*” (CF 59) in which, for each “everybody”, “it only happens to me” (CF 58).

The multiplicity of the self is linked to the fragment as genre of genres, and therefore as the genre that undoes genericity. The relation of each fragment to each other is, in a sense, always homosexual, it is always a relation of fragment to fragment, same to same, and yet the radical differences between, and within, each fragment, demonstrate an absolute heterosexuality, a relation of difference and alterity. Thus the homosexual love between Plato and Socrates in “Envois”, the description of Saint Augustine (SA) as a “little homosexual Jew” (CF 33), the “homosexual ventriloquy” (CF 31) at the heart of autobiographies, the love Derrida repeatedly declares for G. (referring to Bennington, but always

⁶⁹ The name “Elie” calls to “Eli”, a variant of the name of God, and to the high priest Eli that Derrida discusses in *Memoirs of the Blind* (MB 21).

⁷⁰ Elijah figures in “Envois”, which was published eleven years before *Jacques Derrida*. The author calls his beloved from a red phone box, and as they speak the phone box is circled by a tramp he names Elijah. Thus a circumcision is performed – the tramp, named after the prophet symbolically present at circumcisions, circles the red booth and cuts off the conversation.

contaminated by the name of his mother, Georgette), can all be seen to represent relations between the same that is also other. Derrida is the double of his dead brother – conceived, he felt, to replace him, and thereby “excluded *and* favourite” (CF 52) – the double of his sister (whose initials are also J. D.), the double of Augustine and Rousseau – he stole grapes and figs, and compares his mother to Monica, Augustine’s mother. The *autos* is also *heteros*; “‘in *Elie*, everything would be said in the first person, I, I, I and from one sentence to the next, even within the same sentence, it would never be the same I” (CF 55). Derrida is ventriloquised by voices that are his and other, a heterosexual same in a homosexual other that produces multiple histories. As he writes in “Envois”, “steering wheels held with 4 hands, and pursuits and crossings and I pass you and you pass me [*je te double et tu me doubles*]” (E 200). I overtake you and I double you, in ironic contretemps.

A number of different phrases and tropes are presented in *Circumfession* as codes or keys to Derrida and his work: “virus will have been the only object of my work” (CF 18), *escarre* is described as a “password” (CF 18), and

‘Circumcision, that’s all I’ve ever talked about, consider the discourse on the limit, margins, marks, marches, etc., the closure, the ring (alliance and gift), the sacrifice, the writing of the body, the pharmakos excluded or cut off, the cutting/sewing of Glas, the blow and the sewing back up’. (CF 14)

There is no single code to Derrida or his work, as both are multiple. A key to a whole system unlocks its method, but as deconstruction is not a method there can be no key. In giving a key Derrida gives a timed code, a code operative, perhaps, in a certain time and for a certain text, but without a universally applicable value. Each key is a true definition of and key to deconstruction and to Derrida, but is also perjury: “I lied to her [Derrida’s mother] as I do to all of you” (CF 34). “I only know how to deceive, deceive myself, deceive you, and you and you again” (CF 20). Each phrase or term is offered up as a key that will unlock meaning, that will define and delimit Derrida and deconstruction. By offering multiple keys, Derrida presents fragments of a code, explanations that sum up and open a single window, but which close many others. As Derrida writes; there is no single “gift with which to sew up the chain of all my texts” (CF 26). Each fragment, each truth, each “I” has a different singularity and a different key that turns, that reveals, but never absolutely unlocks. *Circumfession* is an interrupted inter-view, an

autoimmune exposure of the self, an ironic hyphenation of self and other, literature and philosophy, personal and public.

Conclusion: W(h)ither Deconstruction?

Volume 32.1 (2010) of *The Oxford Literary Review* is dedicated to “Deconstruction, Environmentalism, and Climate Change”, focusing primarily on the absence of the carbon footprint within the deconstructive step. In “Some Climate Change Ironies”, Clark asks if Derrida’s lack of engagement with climate change is indicative of an inability within deconstruction to address the incalculable effects of “a bounded space in which the consequence of actions may mutate to come back unexpectedly from the other side of the planet”.¹ For Clark we face a situation in which seemingly trivial decisions “become significant or not depending on the contingency of how many others have done, are doing or will do them, anywhere on earth, implicating acts of seeming irrelevance in incalculable impacts”.² In the face of climate change our modes of thinking are “inadequate or anachronistic”,³ incapable of addressing the enormity of “scale effects” in which a routine act is of negligible environmental impact when committed by a single individual but becomes catastrophic when committed by the entire population of a nation or continent. Deconstruction’s focus on negotiation and decision-making is ineffectual when at issue “is not a lack of plausible measures that might reduce pollution in specific instances ... but that the global scale of the issue, combined with scale effects and other uncertainties, derides the significance of any one measure at any one place or time”.⁴

Cohen concurs with deconstruction’s inability to address the radical excesses of climate change, particularly at a time when deconstruction is stagnated by obsessive hagiographies and “anesthetized routines of mourning”.⁵ Texts tend towards to the “exegetical normalisation of Derrida’s writings to the point of recommending, as some legacy-keepers now do, the retirement of ‘deconstruction’ with a full focus on ‘Derrida studies,’ a Derrideanism without deconstruction that ennobles the proper name”.⁶ For Cohen the time of mourning is over, and it is necessary to step towards a “deconstruction without ‘Derrida’, a

¹ Timothy Clark, “Some Climate Change Ironies: Deconstruction, Environmental Politics and the Closure of Ecocriticism”, *The Oxford Literary Review* 32.1 (2010) 134.

² Clark, “Climate” 136.

³ Clark, “Climate” 135.

⁴ Clark, “Climate” 137.

⁵ Tom Cohen, “The Geomorphic Fold: Anapocalyptics, Changing Climes and ‘Late’ Deconstruction”, *The Oxford Literary Review* 32.1 (2010) 82.

⁶ Cohen, “Geomorphic” 73. See chapter six.

deconstruction without ‘deconstruction’”.⁷ He calls for the acknowledgment of the radical and fragmentary within deconstruction – calling, without naming it as such, for an acknowledgement of irony – attesting that if deconstruction recognised itself to be “the point of orientation toward a movement of ex-position that could not, finally, be delineated or given one name”⁸ then it would have to step away from its current, Derridean engagements and investments, and “be able to interrogate those vectors in Derrida’s work that appear non-recuperable and, for that reason, would never have been quite mounted”.⁹ Deconstruction should be recognised as ironic and fragmentary, as a web of contradictory forces and weaknesses that should not be historically preserved, but utilised by being investigated, even attacked. It should be left to autoimmune suicide, and the ashes of what then survives made the resources for further engagements. For Cohen the climactic is “not deconstructible, not narrateable, implies ‘futures’ more calculable than archival pasts, is not of the era of ‘literature’ – or even containable within a designated tropology”.¹⁰ If deconstruction can help us address contemporary problems of environmental catastrophes and focus on the future, it is most certainly not by being made sacrosanct. No *noli me tangere* for deconstruction. Then what?

“As a deconstructive force, intellectually inspiring despite its horror, climate change still works to resist and open up the deep assumptions, pious enclosures and disciplinary parochialisms of current intellectual life, even as its pervasive irony mocks the destructive complacencies of consumer democracy”.¹¹ The pervasive irony that Clark outlines is effectively a structural irony, and it is perhaps through its excessive movement that deconstruction can be saved from a withering away. The steps and movements of parabolic and paratactic irony may provide a framework for making if not the conceptual then the ideological shift from a focus on discrete units and isolated choices to series of interconnected, mutually affective fragments.

The problem of scale effects is a problem of radical disproportion and alterity, as events become explosive fragments in a global series of effects. Each act is not an act in isolation but an act of excessive hyphenation that interrupts the

⁷ Cohen, “Geomorphic” 73.

⁸ Cohen, “Geomorphic” 77.

⁹ Cohen, “Geomorphic” 78.

¹⁰ Cohen, “Geomorphic” 82.

¹¹ Clark, “Climate” 147.

insignificance of the act and ties it to every other event to create a chain of worldwide effects. As a fragment, each action is both a localised, private occurrence and a global, public event of (disastrous) magnitude, and is placed within a series of other fragments that intersect and interlock. Each fragment must be thought of in the plural and writ large, ironically interrupting itself with disproportionate import. A (simple) decision to buy a (fair trade) t-shirt is anacoluthically interrupted by discourses of farming practices, pay and work-hour regulations, and inefficient and polluting modes of transportation. Through a thinking of irony and the multiplicity of fragments the trauma of climate change, which “enact[s] or entail[s] the deconstruction of multiple frames of reference in multiple fields and modes of thought at the same time”,¹² can begin to be addressed, not through an applicable set of procedures for change – irony does not provide that – but through an important ideological shift.

The use of irony in addressing environmental concerns is found in “The Post-ecologist Condition: Irony as Symptom and Cure”, where Bronislaw Szerszynski ostensibly presents irony as *pharmakon*; a disease endemic to modern society *and* its potential cure. Understanding irony as essentially grounded in intention or observation, Szerszynski calls “irony of comportment” the “radical disjuncture between outward behaviour and inward intentions”¹³ that epitomises the current crisis in political meaning. Irony is employed as a *ruse* and *effect* of power; its contradictions enable politicians to shape the world according to a personal, self-involved final vocabulary, and thereby retain power. However, Szerszynski notes that irony can also be used to “make visible such ruses of power ... and draw attention to the situational ironies inherent within unsustainable and unjust cultural practices”.¹⁴ Such a use of irony endangers the ironist, however, as it may render her trapped in her own ironic distance – we’re in very Kierkegaardian territory here – and so Szerszynski proposes an “irony as world relation” that posits an awareness of our interconnectedness.¹⁵ Hence an ironic ecology would involve an exploration of the mutual implication of nature and culture, and an awareness of the partiality and limitations of one’s beliefs, while recognising the inevitability of failure and error, and at the same time the

¹² Clark, “Climate” 132.

¹³ Bronislaw Szerszynski, “The Post-ecologist Condition: Irony as Symptom and Cure”, *Environmental Politics* 16.2 (2007) 343.

¹⁴ Szerszynski 347.

¹⁵ Szerszynski 348.

need to act”.¹⁶ As valuable as this formula is, its grounding in postmodern irony, (cynical) distance and intentionality limits its effectiveness. Its recognition of a mode of “symphilosophic” human/nature interconnectedness is a step towards addressing the excesses of scale effects, but a step too short. Rather than a traditional understanding of irony, the dissymmetry of a fragmentary, structural irony is required.

Thus structural irony is the acknowledgement of the non-public within the public, the momentous within the banal, the heterogeneous within the homogeneous, global within the local. While its implications may still present a certain subject-centred orientation on the mark, its parabolic step and paratactic (dis)order allows for a thinking of effects and implications beyond the immediate or apparent. Contaminated by the movement of irony, a deconstruction that is no longer (just) the work of Derrida but the revenant of an autoimmune suicide, may live on in the border lines of radical, fragmentary engagement.

¹⁶ Szerszynski 351.

Appendix i: “Fable” by Francis Ponge

Fable

*Par le mot par commence donc ce texte
Dont la première ligne dit la vérité,
Mais ce tain sous l’une et l’autre,
Peut-il être toléré?
Cher lecteur déjà tu juges
Là de nos difficultés...*

(APRÈS sept ans de malheurs
Elle brisa son miroir)

Fable

*With the word with begins then this text
Of which the first line states the truth,
But this tain under the one and the other
Can it be tolerated?
Dear reader already you judge
There as to our difficulties...*

(AFTER seven years of misfortune
She broke her mirror.)

(Texts as presented in “Psyche: Inventions of the Other”)

Appendix ii: “At This Very Moment” – final fragment

~ VOICI EN CE MOMENT MÊME J'ENROULE LE CORPS DE NOS VOIX
 ENTRELACÉES CONSONNES VOYELLES ACCENTS FAUTIFS DANS CE
 MANUSCRIT ~ IL ME FAUT POUR TOI LE METTRE EN TERRE ~ VIENS
 PENCHE-TOI NOS GESTES AURONT EU LA LENTEUR INCONSOLABLE QUI
 CONVIENT AU DON COMME S'IL FALLAIT RETARDER L'ÉCHÉANCE SANS
 FIN DUNE RÉPÉTITION ~ C'EST NOTRE ENFANT MUET UNE FILLE PUET-
 ÊTRE D'UN INCESTE MORT-NÉE À L'INCEST SAURA-T-ON JAMAIS PROMISE
 ~ EN FAUTE DE SON CORPS ELLE SE SERA LASSIÉ DÉTRUIRE UN JOUR ET
 SANS RESTE IL FAUT L'ESPÉRER IL FAUT SE GARDER MIEUX ~ PLUS ASSEZ
 DE DIFFÉRENCE LÀ ENTRE ELLES ENTRE L'INHUMÉE OU LES CENDRES
 D'UN BRÛLE-TOUT ~ MAINTENANT ICI MÊME LA CHOSE DE CETTE
 LITURGIE SE GARDE COMME UNE TRACE AUTREMENT DIT SE PERD AU-
 DELÀ DU JEU ET DE LA DÉPENSE TOUT COMPTE POUR D'AUTRES FAIT
 ELLE SE LAISSE DÉJÀ MANGER ~ PAR L'AUTRE PAR TOI QUI ME L'AURAS
 DONNÉE ~ TU SAVAIS DEPUIS TOUJOURS QU'ELLE EST LE CORPS PROPRE
 DE LA FAUTE ELLE N'AURA ÉTÉ APPELÉE DE SON NOM LISIBLE QUE PAR
 TOI EN CELA D'ADVANCE DISPARUE ~ MAIS DANS LA CRYPTTE SANS FOND
 L'INDÉCHIFFRABLE DONNE ENCORE À LIRE POUR UN LAPS AU-DESSUS DE
 SON CORPS QUI LENTEMENT SE DÉCOMPOSE À L'ANALYSE ~ IL NOUS FAUT
 UN NOUVEAU CORPS AU AUTRE SAN PLUS JALOUSIE LE PLUS ANCIEN
 ENCORE À VENIR ~ ELLE NE PARLE PAS L'INNOMMÉE OR TU L'ENTENDS
 MIEUX QUE MOI AVANT MOI EN CE MOMENT MÊME OU POURTANT SUR
 L'AUTRE CÔTÉ DE CET OUVRAGE MOMUMENTAL JE TISSE DE MA VOIX
 POUR M'Y EFFACER CECI TIENS ME VOICI MANGE ~ APPROCHE-TOI ~ POUR
 LUI DONNER ~ BOIS

~ HERE AT THIS VERY MOMENT I ROLL UP THE BODY OF OUR INTERLACED
 VOICES FAULTY CONSONANTS VOWELS ACCENTS IN THIS MANUSCRIPT ~ I
 MUST PUT IT IN THE EARTH FOR YOU ~ COME BEND DOWN OUR GESTURES
 WILL HAVE HAD THE INCONSOLABLE SLOWNESS SUITABLE TO THE GIFT
 AS IF IT WERE NECESSARY TO DELAY THE ENDLESS FALLING DUE OF A
 REPETITION ~ IT IS OUR MUTE INFANT A GIRL PERHAPS OF AN INCEST
 STILLBORN TO AN INCEST PROMISED ONE MAY NEVER KNOW ~ BY FAULT

OF HER BODY SHE WILL HAVE LET HERSELF BE DESTROYED ONE DAY AND
WITHOUT REMAINDER ONE MUST HOPE ONE MUST KEEP HOPE FOR/FROM
ONESELF EVEN THAT THUS SHE WILL GUARD HERSELF BETTER FROM
ALWAYS MORE AND NO MORE JEALOUSY ~ NO LONGER ENOUGH
DIFFERENCE THERE BETWEEN THEM BETWEEN THE FEMININE INHUMED
OR THE ASHES OF A BURN-EVERYTHING ~ NOW HERE EVEN THE THING OF
THIS LITURGY KEEPS ITSELF LIKE A TRACE OTHERWISE SAID LOSES
ITSELF BEYOND PLAY AND EXPENDITURE ALL IN ALL AND ALL
ACCOUNTING FOR OTHERS DONE ALREADY SHE LETS HERSELF BE EATEN
~ BY THE OTHER BY YOU WHO WILL HAVE GIVEN HER TO ME ~ YOU
ALWAYS KNEW THAT SHE IS THE PROPER BODY OF THE FAULT SHE WILL
ONLY HAVE BEEN CALLED BY HER LEGIBLE NAME BY YOU AND IN THAT
IN ADVANCE DISAPPEARED ~ BUT IN THE BOTTOMLESS CRYPT THE
INDECIPHERABLE STILL GIVES ONE TO READ FOR A LAPSE ABOVE HER
BODY THAT SLOWLY DECOMPOSES ON ANALYSIS ~ WE NEED A NEW BODY
ANOTHER WITHOUT ANY MORE JEALOUSY THE MOST ANCIENT STILL TO
COME ~ SHE DOES NOT SPEAK THE UNNAMED ONE YET YOU HEAR HER
BETTER THAN ME AHEAD OF ME AT THIS VERY MOMENT WHERE
NONETHELESS ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THIS MONUMENTAL WORK I
WEAVE WITH MY VOICE SO AS TO BE ERASED THERE THIS TAKE IT HERE I
AM EAT ~ COME CLOSER ~ IN ORDER TO GIVE HIM/HER ~ DRINK

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